

Beloved in Christ: Christ is risen!

This week is the last we will say these words in the time of Pascha until next year. On Wednesday we take leave of the feast by celebrating the Divine Liturgy in the same way we did on the night of Pascha itself. Wednesday evening we begin the celebration of Jesus' ascension into heaven and being seated at the right hand of the Father until He comes again in glory to the earth. The forty days since the resurrection of Christ we celebrate His being among His apostles and disciples in the glory of His risen body, further explaining to them all that was written about Him in the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament.

In healing the man born blind, Jesus, today, shows by word and deed that He is the Son of the Father Who has created the world and Who has come into the world, into our human lives as one of us, to lead us to the Father. But first Jesus' disciples ask Him: who sinned? This man? His parents? It must be sin from the man or his parents that made him blind. These questions about why some get sick and others do not reflect our trying to make sense of the world. But how often can we truly make sense of the evils that befall us?

When we ask such questions to someone, for instance, with lung cancer: Were you a smoker? Is there a history of lung cancer in your family? The questions are logical – we are trying to make sense of the lung cancer diagnosis. Obviously if you were a smoker (your own sin), the lung cancer is the consequence of your own behavior. Or if your family has a history of lung cancer, then it is your ancestors who passed the gene along to you (parent's 'sin'). What the logic does of course is put us at ease, for if there is a clear cause and effect of sin to disease, we can feel safe that the world is reasonable and logical. People get lung cancer because they smoked/sinned or they inherited the sin from their parents.

Such logic may help us get through the day and help us avoid thinking about our own mortality, but we all know the world is a bit more unpredictable than our reason allows. The Holy Prophet Job got his story in our Scriptures. He was righteous yet was stricken with disease and saw his children perish. None of this was because of his sin. God was not punishing him. Fr. Raphael Biernacki, long-time pastor here who fell asleep in the Lord ten years ago come August, had cancer in his lungs and liver. He did not smoke, he wasn't a drinker, he didn't have a history of such cancer in his family. Sometimes evil happens to us, to others, and we are called to the humility of saying we do not know why this happened.

Believers in the ancient world did not have an explanatory category of "natural causes." For us in the scientific world, we can see there are natural disasters whose causes can be explained by natural forces. The right collection of natural forces will produce a tornado or an earthquake or an epidemic. We don't have to think that every event is caused by an angry God. The ancients, lacking a "natural disaster" category tended to interpret all things as acts of God. What was not ever certain was exactly what caused God to act in a particularly destructive way. Many theories were proposed: sin, icons, lack of icons, unwillingness of people to change, people too willing to change. The Prophet Jonah, we remember, was unhappy that God didn't destroy the city of Nineveh. Jonah proclaimed the city would be destroyed, hoped it would happen, and then was disappointed that God didn't do it. Jonah laments what he knows about God: "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." (Jonah 4:2) Sadly many people today share Jonah's lament and don't want God to be merciful, abounding in love and ready to relent from punishing. They prefer the God of retribution not the God who is revealed by Jonah or by Jesus.

We believe in a merciful and loving God. We are not blind to the suffering of the world. Each of us experiences suffering of one kind or another. As believers, we have to wrestle with

the real world, and faith in the God of love. We accept a modern scientific world that some events can be explained by natural causes. We don't always know where God's hand is in these events. We know God created this world. God continues to love His creation, despite the many problems created by natural causes. God could have created a different world, but He apparently finds this world a good world in which to love us. Mortality is part of this world, God loves us anyway. Our Christian faith is that God enters into the human condition and dies in order to save us. God does not avoid death. God does not ask us to suffer something He Himself is not willing to suffer.

And to the question the disciples asked at the beginning of the gospel today, "Jesus answered: 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him.'" (John 9:3). We can make God's work manifest in us in our suffering, even as we question Him like Job, living in Christ as He joins us in any suffering we face.