

### *Idolatry*

Have you ever suffered a traumatic experience, and by that I don't mean just the occasional misfortune, but something that altered your life in a significant way? Perhaps it was the sudden and unexpected death of a loved one, or the onset of a debilitating, even disabling illness, or the break-up of a long marriage or relationship, or being the victim of a violent crime. I would think that many, if not most of us, particularly those of you at my end of the age spectrum, have had such an experience at some point in our lives, and that those of you who have not probably will at some point in your lives.

My question today for those of you who have had a traumatic experience is how did it affect you? Do you think it had a significant effect on you? Did it change you in any way, maybe even how you viewed the world and your place in it? Or did it not have much effect on you at all, at least not over the long term? Time does heal a lot of wounds. In my experience, people respond to such experiences in very different ways. For some, misfortune of the type I'm talking about brings out the best in a person, and they really rise to the occasion. For others, it brings out the worst, leaving a bitter residue that doesn't go away for a very long time, if ever. Indeed, some people may never get over it. I'm sure you know examples of both.

But of course, traumatic events don't just happen to individuals. There are times when an entire community might suffer such an experience, occasionally even an entire nation, conceivably even the entire world, particularly now days, and in such cases, the people involved deal with the trauma not just individually but communally, and just as some individuals rise to the occasion at such times, while others never get over it, the same is true of communities, some of which never recover from a truly traumatic experience, while others bounce back stronger than ever.

I wonder, for example, how the community of Newtown, Connecticut, is doing these days after the terrible tragedy it suffered several years ago when twenty-six young children and teachers were killed by a gunman at a local elementary school. Part of me wonders how a town could ever get over that, at least not for a very long time. Or what's likely to be the effect of the murderous and ongoing civil war that has torn apart Syria in recent years? Will those wounds will ever heal? Or what about the long-term effects of the great influenza epidemic of 1918? Though almost forgotten today, it killed an enormous number of people world-wide, including all four of my great-grandfathers, all veterans of the Civil War but all of whom succumbed to the flu over the course of just a few months. How did so many deaths in so short of time affect communities back then?

When I talk about the effects of such experiences, I don't mean just the obvious things that are apparent to everyone, but also the more subtle effects that may not be so obvious and yet are

for more profound and long lasting. Knowing what those effects are, are there any lessons to be learned from such examples, whether that of individuals or communities, in terms of dealing with trauma in our lives in a more constructive fashion? Are there mistakes that a person or a community would do well to avoid, reactions to such experiences that may be more harmful even than the original trauma? Which, I suspect, is more often the case than we may think. For example, as destructive as the Civil War was to the South, the communal reaction to that trauma in the years after the war in many places did far more damage to that region than the war itself ever did.

Not surprisingly, there are several examples of such events and the way people reacted to them in scripture, sometimes for the better, other times for the worse. For example, the experience of long periods of oppression, most of all that of slavery in Egypt, clearly had a profound impact upon the Israelite people and very much shaped their vision of Israel as a nation, a nation where they were determined no one would treat anyone the way they had been treated in Egypt. Or later on, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, and the resulting lengthy exile of its educated classes to Babylon, an experience so catastrophic that it prompted a complete re-thinking of Israel's history, and a re-constituting of what it meant to be the people of God, the fruits of which are what we call the Old Testament. Both cases where a traumatic experience brought out the best in a people.

But the Biblical experience I'd like to talk about today is one that did not, did not bring out the best in the people most affected. It's something that happened in New Testament times, and its impact is quite evident in the books of the New Testament, though not all of them, but only those written after this particular event took place. I'm talking about the destruction of Jerusalem (yet again), and even more so, the destruction of the Temple, events that took place in the year 70 AD, this time at the hands of the Romans, who had every intention of doing to Jerusalem what they had so famously done earlier to Carthage, which was to wipe the city off the face of the earth. It was a horrendous experience, and it profoundly affected everyone who lived through it, or who cared about Jerusalem. Which is one of the reasons there's so much difference in the way the apostle Paul talks about Jesus in his letters, and the way Jesus is portrayed in the four gospels.

Why the difference? Because the letters of Paul were all written *before* the destruction of the Temple, while the gospels were all written *after*, and that event dramatically changed the religious landscape for both Jews and Christians, a change that is very much reflected in all of the gospels. Thus while Paul's greatest hope is that both Jews and Gentiles can together be the church, the body of Christ, by the time we get to the gospels, it's painfully clear that's not going to happen. Not in this lifetime.

Why not? Because unlike earlier, when the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple had caused the various factions of the Israelites to come together and heal their divisions, this time the destruction of the Temple caused the Jewish community to fracture, with the larger faction—those who would be the ones considered Jews—blaming the catastrophe on other factions—among them, the Jews who were followers of Jesus Christ. Whereas up till then, the Jewish Christians had been free to worship as Jews in the synagogue, after the Temple's destruction, they

were effectively banished from the synagogue and no longer considered by the larger community to be Jews at all.

In many cases Jewish Christians were even thrown out of their own families, and traces of the pain that caused is evident in all the gospels. It was a traumatic experience, and the reaction in the church was increasingly to see the destruction of the Temple as God's judgment upon the Jews for the death of Jesus Christ, thus the hostility toward the Jewish people that is all too evident in the gospels, and painfully so in the Gospel of John. What happened was precisely the kind of finger pointing and mutual recrimination that can all too easily take place in the wake of a traumatic experience. Sadly, the bitterness of that tragic split within the Jewish community in the aftermath of the Temple's destruction has remained with us to this day, in all too many places continuing to poison the relations between Christians and Jews. It didn't have to happen.

I think there are many lessons to be learned from these examples, among them how cautious one must be in seeing the hand of God in the case of traumatic experiences, whether in one's own life or that of a wider community. Certainly the hand of God is present in all things that happen in this world, but to label a particular event as God's doing is a very dangerous thing to do, especially when it takes the form of declaring something to be God's judgment, God punishing someone. Doing that is, in its own way, idolatrous.

I never really thought of this as idolatry, until I stumbled across a passage this week in one of John Calvin's works where he talks about it, about the danger of our labeling things as God's will, our seeing the hand of God in things that happen in our world, and claiming to know exactly what God has done and why. Calvin calls this a form of idolatry. Not idolatry in the usual sense of making images of animals or human beings, and worshipping them as gods, as happened with the famous golden calf in Exodus. No, this is a more subtle kind of idolatry, the idolatry of projecting God onto certain events, and declaring them then to be God's doing and a demonstration of God's will. That the destruction of the Temple was God's punishment of the Jews. Or that AIDS was God's punishment of gays. Or that the events of 9/11 were God's punishment of America for all its sins. Or on and on. A more subtle idolatry than a golden calf, perhaps, but far more dangerous. Dangerous because it presumes to know the mind of God, and there is nothing more dangerous than a human being who is certain that he or she knows the mind of God.

In the end, there is really only one event that has ever taken place in which we can unambiguously see the hand of God, and can then declare without any hesitation to represent the will of God. That was the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross, God's judgment upon this whole world for its sin, yet a judgment visited upon only one person, that being God's own son, who out of his love for this world and all its people freely took upon himself the sins of the world. So if you want to know what the will of God is, where to look to see the will of God, look at the cross.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,  
to whom be all glory and honor, now and to endless ages...*