

WHO SINNED?
Sermon for Lent 4A—Jn 9:1-41
LPC, 3/30/14

Why did Jesus heal this blind man? The man hadn't asked to be healed. He seems to have been, initially at least, almost a prop to Jesus' teaching in response to a question.

Of course, Jesus was compassionate. We know that. But Jesus' motivation in healing this man was not simple compassion, although compassion was certainly part of it. Jesus' greater purpose in healing this blind man was to heal all people from a false and simplistic model of God.

This false and simplistic model of God is that because God is just, good fortune must be a God's reward for the person's goodness and bad fortune, especially chronic illness, must be God's punishment for some evil done. This notion is part of what is known as "retributive justice," and I discussed it at length at my Lenten series presentation a couple of weeks ago.

Now, if we use our heads and our eyes, we can see all around us that righteous people sometimes suffer and evil people often seem to prosper. This realization is enough for many people to give up on God altogether and become atheists.

If we persist in believing in God, we have to realize that God is doing something in the world other than simply rewarding good people and punishing bad people. Yet the idea of retributive justice keeps on turning up. There are always ministers, priests, rabbis and other clerics willing to attribute massive misfortune, from 9-11 to catastrophic weather, to some evil going on in society.

Now we Episcopalians are too sophisticated for that, right? No, we're not. I talk to a lot of Episcopalians in a lot of circumstances. Sometimes people are doing the right thing, taking the high road in dysfunctional situations, refusing to get involved in accusations and counter-accusations, trying to be compassionate and understanding and not succumb to anger, fear and hate... and they're getting absolutely creamed. They are bound to wonder why God is letting this happen, since they're trying so hard to play by God's own rules.

Conversely, many people feel guilty because while there is so much suffering in the world, through no particular virtue of their own, they are particularly blessed with health, wealth, happiness and love. Why feel guilty unless there is some residual assumption that good fortune needs to be God's reward for good behavior?

Why do we retain these vestiges of belief that good fortune is evidence of God's favor and bad fortune proves God's judgment?

Well, huge tracts of the Bible support this belief. The God-given law actually says, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." The people of Israel in the wilderness are plagued with skin diseases and snake bite ostensibly because God is fed up with their

complaining. The prophets declare that Israel's subjugation by the Assyrians is a consequence of injustice and neglecting the poor. In the book of Acts, two members of the new Christian community are struck down and die instantly because they are not sharing their property with the disciples. Even the Lord's Prayer seems to make God's forgiveness conditional on good behavior: "Forgive our sins *as we forgive* those who sin against us."

But that's not all that's in the Bible. We have God singling out and blessing people who do lots of bad stuff that is elsewhere punished roundly: people like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Samson, David and Solomon.

We have lots of other examples of good people suffering: David's friend Jonathan is unrelentingly steadfast to both his father Saul and to David, a thankless task when the two become enemies, and he ends up being killed. The psalmist laments that his love has been requited with evil. Job is a righteous man stripped of all comforts. Isaiah speaks of a "suffering servant," a righteous person who suffers sacrificially for all the people.

And, of course, Jesus, the sinless one, who dies a most horrible death. Plus all the martyrs of the Christian tradition.

Let's go back to the blind man in the story. He may have started out as a prop, but he turns into a moral agent in the story. Watch how his belief grows. At first he just keeps responding to questions about what happened to him. He knows Jesus is involved but doesn't know why or how. When pressed further, he proposes that Jesus is a prophet.

This is the wrong thing to say. It makes people mad, but the man doesn't back down. In fact, he begins to assert himself, and even goes on the offensive: "Do you also want to be his disciples?" This is really the wrong thing to say, but the man goes further, and reasons out, probably as much to himself as to anyone else, that Jesus must be from God. For this he is cast out of the synagogue. Finally, approached by Jesus again, he declares his belief in Jesus.

The man has been given his sight. He has also been ostracized. Is his healing a blessing or a curse?

The man's healing is a blessing. It has served God's purposes. Jesus has healed this man in response to a question about whose sin caused the blindness. Jesus healed him to show that God cannot be conformed to human conventions of retributive justice. God must be free to redeem as God chooses.

God is not someone you can strike a deal with – good fortune for good behavior. God must be free to redeem the world as God sees fit, even if that means upsetting the status quo, upon which some people's power, comfort, or complacency depend. Sin does not cause blindness. Blindness causes sin. And the worse blindness of all is failure to recognize that God is in charge.