

16th Sunday after Trinity 24th September 2023 CCC Canon Gary Hastings

The Gospel is about how God loves us all equally, which sounds very fair. But all the workers get the same money however long they worked. Which is not fair. So why does bad stuff happen to good people and vice versa? Why isn't life fair? Why isn't God fair?

We talk about good luck and bad luck, or providence, where we profess to see the Hand of God in things that happen. We pray for good things to happen, and for bad things not to happen. We ask God for care and protection and for healing. The fact of the matter is that sometimes bad things happen, sometimes they don't. Sometimes good things happen, sometimes they don't. Sometimes nothing much happens at all, bad or good. And please remember, before we go any further, Good here means 'stuff we really like', and Bad means, 'Stuff we really don't like'. We aren't talking good and evil here, that's a different ball game.

So, where is God in it all? Are the good things rewards and gifts and are the bad things punishments or teachings? How does it work? Or what difference does prayer make? Can we influence things? Yes and no is the answer. During a war there are severe amounts of prayer going on, on both sides, you can be sure. But some people get blown to bits, maimed and hurt, on both sides and some don't. What's it all about? How do we work it out?

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying prayer is rubbish. But one thing I do know. This life, this world, this universe isn't simple. Never mind God for a moment, the place we live is a massive incomprehensible complexity, from the web of life on earth of which we are a part, to the very structure of matter, to the vastness of space and the billions of suns and galaxies all around us. Then on top of that, there's this God bloke, about whom we know very little, and who came up with the whole show, created it, and keeps it in existence from millisecond to millisecond. We, on the other hand, are worried about our Auntie Aggie's bad leg, and the awful weather, and the price of eggs, and we want immediate response and miraculous cure. Now, not yesterday.

We think we know how God works, what he thinks, what he is obliged to do at any moment in time, what he should have done, all the rest. But our personal world is very, very small. It's to do with our life, our house, our relatives and family, our welfare and the welfare of our friends. We don't get the whole picture, we can't see or understand it. Now I'm not defending God here. Bad things aren't good things. But they are part of what happens, part of living and dying and being born into this world, and it isn't fair. We think we know how things should work. We think we have discovered the principle behind all existence, and it's called being fair, and if things aren't fair, we squeal very loudly. I know this for a fact, but I still have to keep reminding myself from time to time. Fairness is a human invention. It is the basic law of children, everything must be fair, equally divided, and no bad bits. Or at least equal bad bits for all. Or else it's not fair. But fairness isn't part of how the universe works, or how God works. Life isn't fair. The parable of Jesus today shows that God isn't fair. He loves everybody the same, whatever the consequences, and whether we like it or not. And elsewhere Jesus says the events of our lives aren't about punishment or reward: the rain rains and the sun shines on saint and sinner equally.

Fairness isn't about generosity or love. Fairness is where everything is the same, all good, all equal, all the time, — so that I don't lose out. Fairness is essentially selfish.

Life can't actually work like that. Life, — real life, has good bits and bad bits and boring bits. That's the crack. Anything else we have made up for ourselves, like fairness, or a big Daddy in the sky who will make sure that everything is fair for everybody always, with no bad bits. Fairness has two sides to it. First of all it means that every good child will get the same number of sweeties as every other good child. But it also means that bad children shouldn't really get any sweeties at all, and if they're very bad, they should get punished. Bad things should happen to bad people. Good things to good people. And children who aren't as good as other good children shouldn't get as many sweets as the children who are very, very good. All this sounds very fair, doesn't it? But the big Daddy in the sky with the sweeties doesn't exist. Instead, what we have is God and the universe. And not only that, but a God who gives all his sweeties away, and goes and gets himself crucified. He gives himself totally and completely to anyone who wants a bit. You don't just get a small bit, the same as the next fella's, even though that fella's not very good, and didn't do as much work as you. God is worse than that. He gives sweeties to everybody and anybody who's interested. All the love and forgiveness and acceptance you or anybody else can handle.

We can't understand that. We can't and don't understand this God and this universe. So then we make up a God we do understand, one in our own image, and we reinvent the universe as well. We are wrecking this planet in order to make it fit the dream we invented, which is that everything in the universe — or at least on this planet — must be nice and good for everybody. Especially for us. We get angry and frustrated when the whole thing doesn't work and someone dies, or a disaster happens — especially when it happens to us, or when poor people from far away decide they want a bit of what we've got — and we stamp our foot and say we don't believe in God anymore. Quite right too. We have been believing in the wrong God all along.

We have to waken up. We have to pray to the real God, get to know him as he and /or she really is, begin to understand that God is very different from us, and we might have things to learn about that. That's what the book of Job is all about. Read it sometime. Even just the beginning and the last couple of chapters. A good man, Job, does nothing wrong and his world falls apart, through illness, poverty, and bereavement. Why? he says. And then God speaks to him, and he sees and is quiet. We aren't told what he saw, or what he understood. Because it isn't simple or straightforward. God is involved in all that happens, but how and in what way is not simple and cannot be simple. It's not a matter of a sweetie when you're good and a smack on the ear when you're bad. It's much, much more complicated than that. But you get loved whatever happens.

There's only one thing to remember; it's not fair. Life is not fair, God is not fair, and prayer is not a letter to Santa. God is not fair — God is love; that way God can be in everything and everywhere regardless. Everything is in God, whether we think it's good or bad. God made it all, and loves it all equally. — Both the bad bits we don't like, as well as the good bits we do like.

Suffering is part of the deal. Our Lord himself went through it. We should not deny suffering or embrace it, indeed we should struggle to ease it for all if we can, but we have to recognise it as part of what goes on, and open our eyes to the reality of what is, not what we want there to be. If there is suffering, it is only a drop in the ocean of the infinite love that is our God. That love is offered to all of us on the same terms, and we each get it all, whoever we are, whatever we've done. The only way to understand, is to waken up to how God and how life actually is, and try to forget about the things we've just made up. Amen.