

St Mary Abbots, Matins, 13th June 2021

Father Christopher Rogers

Trinity 2 2021

Jeremiah 7:1-6 Romans 9:14-26

It was a very hot noon, that fatal noon, and coming around the shoulder of a hill Brother Juniper stopped to wipe his forehead and to gaze upon the screen of snowy peaks in the distance, then into the gorge below him filled with the dark plumage of green trees and green birds and traversed by its ladder of osier. Joy was in him; things were not going badly. He had opened several little abandoned churches, and the Indians were crawling in to early Mass and groaning at the moment of miracle as though their hearts would break. Perhaps it was the pure air from the snows before him; perhaps it was the memory that brushed him for a moment of the poem that bade him raise his eyes to the helpful hills. At all events he felt at peace. Then his glance fell upon the bridge, and at that moment a twanging noise filled the air, as when the string of some musical instrument snaps in a disused room, and he saw the bridge divide and fling five gesticulating ants into the valley below.

Anyone else would have said to himself with secret joy: 'Within ten minutes myself!...' But it was another thought that visited Brother Juniper: 'Why did this happen to *those* five?' If there were any plan in the universe at all, if there were any pattern in a human life, surely it could be discovered mysteriously latent in those lives so suddenly cut off. Either we live by accident and die by accident, or we live by plan and die by plan. And on that instant Brother Juniper made the resolve to inquire into the secret lives of those five persons that moment falling through the air, and to surprise the reason of their taking off.

This is the start of one of my favourite novels, 'The Bridge of San Luis Rey' by Thornton Wilder, and the rest of the novel is made up of Brother Juniper's investigations into the lives of those five who had had the misfortune to be on the eponymous bridge at the moment of disaster, thereby seeking to uncover God's plan in so disposing of them, for surely their end could be no simple accident.

This is a question posed probably for as long as human beings have existed, and is the same one posed, or at least implied, by both of our readings this morning. I can tell you one thing for certain: I am not about to be the one to end the asking of such a question, at around 10 a.m. on Sunday 13th June at St Mary Abbots Church in Kensington. If I were able to, this service of Matins would displace the G7, COVID and all the other items in the news worldwide, and my work here, so recently commenced, would be done. And, spoiler alert, nor does Brother Juniper resolve the question either.

The essential question, is 'Why do bad things happen to good people?'
And its necessary converse question, why do good things happen to bad people?

The most obvious poser of this question is of course Job. Our '*blameless and upright*' hero descends from deserved prosperity, watching his farms and family blossom and grow, to losing all that is closest to him, from crops to sons, for no apparent reason (save for the bet between God and Satan which is the premise of that book).

Job's response to his friends is '*The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord.*'

How many of us have not asked the same question when seeing those closest to us suffering from cancer, genetic disorders or befalling dreadful accidents, or indeed have been subjected to such suffering ourselves?

There are really I think two principal answers to this question in our readings. In Jeremiah the Jewish people are told that they are looking for righteousness in the wrong things, in the building of the Temple to be precise, as though simply being there made one a good person, and immune to judgment. Whereas in fact, he tells us, '*if you truly act justly with one another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place.*'

And in his letter to the Romans St Paul gives his largely Gentile readers the same answer as the book of Job: that it is not for us to scrutinise God's ways.

The latter answer is hard to hear, and even harder to put into practice. We cannot help but ask what a good, omnipotent God is doing when He lets good people suffer. And yet, St Paul seems to be telling us that it is arrogant of us, the clay, to question our potter. '[W]ho indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God?'

I could simply end there and sit down with that answer of St Paul's, but it is I think, on its own at least, rather unsatisfactory. Theology itself is, as St Anselm put it, 'faith seeking understanding', and St Paul's point is perhaps rather that we cannot expect to box God in with our answers, rather than that we should not grapple with the questions at all.

I think we must therefore look elsewhere for an answer to our question. And we find one, or as close as we are likely to come, in a few words of Jesus's in St Luke's gospel. He is asked why 18 people died when the tower of Siloam fell. We know nothing more of this tower, and yet in that mention is implied all of the grief and wild questioning of God that happens after any great tragedy, or 'act of God' as English law still terms such incidents where no human being seems to be to blame.

The same question that Brother Juniper seeks to answer regarding the five who died when the bridge of San Luis Rey fell.

And Jesus gives something of a contradictory answer. On the one hand a startlingly modern one, or at least so to my ears:

'do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you.'

That would seem to suggest accident, precisely the answer that Brother Juniper could not accept.

And yet He goes on to say, '*but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.*' As with many of Jesus's answers, He turns the question back round to His interlocutors: you are asking the wrong question. Rather than interrogating the motives of others, you should be interrogating your own attitudes and actions.

And does He mean that you will literally perish, by a tower falling on you?

Perhaps not.

In Jeremiah God promises to dwell with those who show mercy, who act justly with others, and do not oppress the alien, the widow and the orphan.

And perhaps dwelling with God is the only reward we should expect or need.

Our faith may not, after all, save us from falling towers or from collapsing bridges.

God will however be with us when we go through the darkest points in our life, even if it may not feel like it at the time.

And sometimes an accident is just that.

Amen