

21st Sunday of Ordinary Time “Understanding Divine Punishment”

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My friends, one of the most controversial and unpopular topics in Christianity is the theme of divine punishment. You may be interested to know that every branch of Christianity seems to have its own take on the topic of damnation. Martin Luther, for example, believed that before the fall of Adam, God willed all to be saved. After the fall of Adam, however, Luther taught that God predestined some for heaven and predestined most of humanity to hell. In contrast to Luther, John Calvin wanted to protect the omniscience of God, and therefore taught that even before the fall of Adam, God had already predestined some for heaven and most for hell. In contrast to the writings of Luther and Calvin, the Catholic Church teaches that even after the fall of Adam God still predestined all of humanity for heaven. The problem is sinfulness gets in the way. Sin can be for a soul a fundamental choice of opposition to God. Hell then can be understood as the soul’s fundamental decision to be eternally separated from God. Of course, talk of divine punishment these days is very controversial and unpopular, especially when we start pondering whether some of our suffering and woes in this life may be the result of divine punishment. This is a dangerous topic because it can be misused and it does get misused. We must deal with this topic however because we see the theme of divine punishment throughout the bible.

Genesis attributes the whole of the human condition, inclination to sin, suffering and death itself as the result of God’s punishment of Adam and Eve. Genesis also attributes the division between cultures, nations and races to God’s punishment upon the people of Babel. And how about that story about Noah’s Ark? In Exodus, God punishes the Hebrews for their infidelity by forcing them to walk through the desert for forty years prior to entering the Promised Land. Whenever Israel loses a battle, it is interpreted as divine punishment. Why does King Saul fall from grace? Divine punishment. Why is one of David’s sons killed? Divine punishment. Israel is divided into North and South due to Solomon’s sin. All the prophets are in agreement that the Babylonian Exile was divine punishment for the infidelity of Israel. God tells Jonah to travel by land in one direction, Jonah travels instead by sea in the opposite direction. The result? Big ol’ fish comes and swallows him and, after three days, spits him out back onto land in the direction God wanted him to go in the first place.

Now that we have had this quick survey of the Old Testament, what do we find in the New Testament? In the Gospel today, our Lord warns of people being cast out on the last day, wailing and grinding their teeth. In Corinthians, Paul tells the people that some of them are sick and dying because of their sinful behavior. The bible ends with Revelation, the final judgment and the destruction of our world due to sin.

What is the point of this survey? The point is, the theme of divine punishment isn't periphery or tangential in Sacred Scripture. Rather, the theme of divine punishment is actually pretty central throughout Sacred Scripture, running from beginning all the way to the end. What are we to make of this? I think people have a hard time dealing with the theme of divine punishment because; first of all, it is unpleasant to think about; secondly, it seems conflicted with the God of love we hear about Sunday after Sunday; and finally, the theme of divine punishment can be abused, as if our physical maladies or personal tragedies are always due to God punishing us. The idea of divine punishment can be abused and does get abused. However, if we are to be true to scripture, even physical maladies or personal tragedies can sometimes be interpreted correctly, albeit carefully, as God's punishment. How?

Everything that I have said thus far is an elaborate introduction to our second reading from Hebrews that talks specifically about how to interpret God's punishment in our spiritual journeys. The reading from Hebrews today begins, "Brothers and sisters, you have forgotten the exhortation addressed to you as children, 'My child, do not disdain the discipline of the Lord or lose heart when reproved by Him; for whom the Lord loves, He disciplines, He scourges every child He acknowledges.'" My friends, God's punishment, understood correctly, is best understood as God disciplining us, as a parent would discipline his or her child. If parents did not discipline their children, but just let them run wild without consequence, we would call them bad parents. If a teacher in the classroom didn't give challenging lessons and, at times, discipline a child who isn't making the grade, we would call that instructor a bad teacher. It is the same thing with coaches, employers, politicians, bishops and pastors.

Divine punishment however ought not to be understood in the way the ancient pagans did, as if divine punishment was the result of a capricious, fickle pantheon, distant and ultimately uncaring of the human race. No. Divine punishment, properly understood is rather a function of God's love for us. Sacred Scripture refers to God like a mother or a father reproving his children. Jesus challenges us to call God, Abba, which is best interpreted as daddy rather than father. Listen to Hebrews again, "God treats you as children. For what child is there whom his father does not discipline. At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later, it brings peace and justice to those trained by it." My friends, does God at times discipline us, make us feel the consequences of our sinfulness, so that we might change our sinful ways, and return to him? Yes. What is the motivation for God's discipline? Love! The love of a parent for his or her child! Not anger, love!

So, once more, is Luther right in saying that after the fall God predestined most for hell? No. Is Calvin right in saying even before the fall God predestined most for hell? No. My friends, God wills all to be saved. God so loved the world that he sent his only son so that we might not die but have eternal life. Sin however can and does get in the way. So let me leave you with a question, if everything in this life is a preparation for eternal life, can we see some of our sufferings and pains as God's way of allowing us to feel the results of our sinfulness, so that we might turn around and take that steep and narrow road to the joy God has prepared for us?