

Our Old Testament and Gospel lessons set for today both speak of personal tragedy, in each case the death of the only son of an elderly widow. In the first it is the son of the widow at Zarephath. There is a particular edge to this one as she has willingly shared what little she and her son had with Elijah. In her anguish she rails against Elijah, only to acclaim him when her son is raised from the dead. In the case of our Gospel reading, Jesus comes upon a funeral and we have the account of him raising the young man from the dead.

We have here powerful images of the power of God in the face of death that inspire faith. But as I read over them the thought occurred to me that things do not always work out this way, there are not always the happy endings we see portrayed in our readings this morning. But does this mean that God is absent in these situations, that God is indifferent to the anguish of those for whom things do not turn out. I recall discussing the Ministry of Healing, the offering of prayer for the sick with a colleague in Ballymena. As we chatted, he said it is a messy, untidy business with lots of loose ends but he still feels compelled to do it. The problem of sickness, the problem of death leaves many unanswered, indeed unanswerable questions. From time to time, I find myself going back to a book written by a Jewish Rabbi, ‘Why do bad things happen to good people?’ He wrote it as he came to terms with the death of his son following a long degenerative illness involving the premature ageing of his once healthy son. In a very moving story he comes to see God not as the agent of his son’s illness but one who stood by him and his family through the course of the illness.

There is a great wisdom and spiritual depth in some of the Collects of the Day, these prayers often dating from the earliest days of the Church, crafted into English by Cranmer and subsequent liturgical scholars. In a few short lines, they encapsulate deep spiritual truth.

As I thought through this whole problem of suffering, of illness and death I thought of the Collect of the 8th Sunday after Trinity in the old Prayer Book:

O GOD, whose never-failing providence ordereth all things both in heaven and earth; We humbly beseech thee to put away from us all hurtful things, and to give us those things which be profitable for us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.** (*p 287 BCP2004*)

A God who orders all things. Do we take that to mean that God controls everything as a puppet master might control a puppet? A blind fate that just carries on. Then one day I recall reading a commentary on the collects. The author pointed out that in the Latin in which the Collect was originally written, the word that was translated as ordereth has the sense not so much of controlling everything, more that of working through everything.

As I reflected once more on that, my mind went back to one of the saddest funerals I conducted during my time in Ahoghill, that of a young boy killed in a freak accident. It was just coming up to the 12th July. The young lad, just off school, was heading to his summer job. Late as usual he headed down the street into the village on his bike, only to find it blocked. A pipe bomb had been left outside a Roman Catholic house. He turned back and rushing out of the top of the street onto the main road he was struck by a car drawing a trailer – there was nothing the driver could do. Many, even some close family members talked loosely of ‘It must have been God’s will – we don’t understand now but we will in time.’ – Sentiments that I found utterly appalling. God did not will the death of that young man – his death was caused by the stupid, bigoted fool who planted the pipe bomb thinking he was doing something wonderful for his twisted image of Ulster.

As I looked down the Church on the day of his funeral I saw the driver of the car, a devout member of the local Presbyterian Church. Seated on either side of him were Rev Dr Harry Upritchard, his own Presbyterian Minister and on

the other side his immediate neighbour, Fr Hugh O'Hagan, Parish Priest of Ahoghill. Each had come to support a man in total despair at what had happened. In a village that did n't lend itself to formal ecumenical events, the presence of those two men in the same pew, in the days leading up to the 12th gave a powerful witness of Christian compassion in the face of unbearable sadness. It was not the will of God that that young man died – but God did work in and through that situation to bring something of his light and his hope into that Church that afternoon.

Going back to our readings; the same God who raised the son of the widow at Zaraphath, who raised the son of the widow at Nain, works also to bring life and hope into our hospices, into our prisons, into situations of sickness, of death and despair. He will do that through ordinary people. That afternoon in Ahoghill he did it through the simple presence in the one pew of two men separated by wide theological differences. He will do it through the kind word of a hospice attendant, a neighbour dropping in to someone in hospital or housebound. The God who ordereth all things, who works through all things, even in situations of unimaginable pain - he will do it through you and me.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen

Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi