

DOES GOD ANSWER PRAYERS TODAY? (Bob Williamson 27-09-2015)

When I was asked to lead the service for today I did not know where to start. My friend Ray Lewis looked up something called a Lectionary which gives five suggested readings. Then I looked at a website called Seasons which had a different suggested theme for today giving me a total of 6 possibilities. So read through them all and tried to find some connection or message that would give me inspiration. And nothing came through. So I did what one does in this sort of situation – I began to panic and in my mind cried out “O God – help!”

Then a family emergency arose. Joan’s brother was missing in bad weather in the central South Island and we decided to travel to try to help in the search. We went at short notice with little time to plan but I took with me my Kindle. If you don’t know what a kindle is – it is a small electronic device which can store books to read. (SHOW) A year or two earlier I had down-loaded and stored a little book called “When bad things happen to good people” by a Jewish Rabbi named Harold Kushner. So I decided to read this book while in the Sth Is. As I read, suddenly my prayer was answered and I knew what I wanted to talk about today.

I want to acknowledge the help I have had from Rabbi Kushner’s book. He is a man who has had his faith in God tested. As a young Rabbi he and his wife had the joy of a young son, Aaron. At first Aaron seemed a happy healthy toddler but then his parents began to worry that he was not developing normally. After many visits to doctors and specialists they received the diagnosis that Aaron was suffering from the rare genetic disorder of Progeria. This meant that he would go through a process of rapid aging and would die as a little old man in his teenage years. And so it happened. Aaron died of old age at 14. Rabbi Kushner wrote his book as a result of this personal experience and the human tragedies he dealt in his pastoral work in his congregation. I recommend the book – it is well worth reading.

My theme for this sermon is “Does God answer prayers today” Let’s start by looking at the three bible passages which were read earlier.

The Old Testament reading came from Esther. This book comes from the time after the people of Judah were conquered by the Babylonians and a large part of the population were forced into exile and had to live in the area which today

is Iraq. The Babylonians in turn were conquered by the Medes and the Persians and Esther comes from this period. The book is set in the court of Xerxes one of the most powerful men who ever lived. (SHOW EMPIRE OF XERXES) He ruled a vast area from the west of India to Macedonia in Europe, to Egypt in the south. In Esther the emperor Xerxes comes across as a bit of a dim-wit. First he is having a party with his mates and orders his queen, Vashti, to appear in her royal finery. Vashti, in an attitude modern feminists would applaud, refuses and gets divorced and deposed. The emperor's advisers then persuade him to run a beauty contest to find candidates for his harem. One of those chosen is a young Jewish orphan, Esther. Esther wins the heart of Xerxes and becomes the new queen. (SHOW QUEEN ESTHER)

Then disaster threatens the Jewish exiles. The emperor's chief minister persuades him to issue an edict that all the Jews in the empire are to be killed. Word comes to Esther from her cousin Mordecai that only she can save her people through her influence with the emperor. The problem is that Esther has not seen the Emperor for a month and the rule of the court is that anyone who approaches the emperor without an invitation will be executed. Esther agrees to try to help her people and as we heard asks for all the Jews in the capital Susa to fast and pray for her. Then she goes to Xerxes dressed in her best royal robes – the emperor accepts her and Esther manoeuvres him into a new edict by which the Jews are saved. It's a cracking yarn! Worthy of Mills and Boon.

The second reading comes from the letter of James, the brother of Jesus. It contains the well-known passage advising on healing for the sick. We are to call on the elders of the church and to anoint with oil and, I quote "the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well". I have real difficulty with this passage. I have been involved in following these instructions with sincere prayer from many people and our friend has not got well, even died. What are we to make of this?

The Gospel reading from John chapter 14 is where Jesus promises that after his death the Father will send the Holy Spirit, the counsellor and comforter to his followers.

We now get to the question which Rabbi Kushner deals with in his book. Two quotes– “There is only one question which really matters –“ why do bad things happen to good people?” and again, “we are troubled by the unfair distribution of suffering in the world”

Why? It seems to contradict the words we can find if we search the Bible. For example “No harm befalls the righteous but the wicked have their fill of trouble” (Proverbs 12:21)

Our experience and the news we can read or see on TV every day tells us that suffering and disasters happen to ordinary people who do not seem wicked or deserving of punishment. Why did Rabbi Kushner’s young son die of old age at 14? Why were 6 million Jews murdered by Adolf Hitler and his evil gang during World War 2? Why do millions of Syrians have to flee their country?

I am sure you can think of many examples of bad things happening to good people.

Now what I am about to say may shock you but stay with me please.

Firstly let’s get rid of some possible explanations for undeserved suffering.

Number one- God did it. I do not believe it. The Father God that Jesus taught us about is loving and righteous and does not want his children to suffer. The insurance companies who term earthquakes and other natural disasters “Acts of God” are wrong even sacrilegious.

Number two possible explanation. The person who suffers or their parents or ancestors or someone close, did something bad and the disaster inflicted on the individual is the result of this past sin. Again – I do not believe it. I know one can find Bible verses talking about retribution to the third and fourth generation but I cannot believe that a loving Father God would punish innocent children for the sins of their ancestors. In Luke chapter 13, Jesus’ disciples draw his attention to two recent occasions when lives were lost, one by actions of the Roman occupying forces and one through a natural disaster. The disciples ask “did this occur because the victims were sinners?” Jesus gives an emphatic no – saying we are all sinners and the victims were no worse than other citizens.

Number three possible explanation – the disaster happened because Christian people did not pray hard enough or with sufficient faith. Again I do not believe it. God is not some celestial slot-machine which can be manipulated into giving out a jack-pot by depositing enough credits.

So having got rid of three possible explanations, why do bad things happen to good people? In my view there are two main reasons for the suffering we see in this world.

The first reason is that God gave human beings free will. As it says in Genesis Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If we are honest and examine our own hearts we know that in us all is the potential for good and for evil. We are in part like animals programmed by instinct and in part by teaching and conscience to be kind, generous and loving. As Paul says in Romans 14 “When I want to do good, evil is right there with me What a wretched man I am!”

When men and women give way to their lower nature they can cause suffering to other innocent people. The Syrian crisis started because of a corrupt dictatorship followed by a resistance movement which has split and then came in the evil ISIS ideology. Result chaos.

Some may say why does God not intervene? Because if God did over-ride when evil people do bad things there would no longer be free will. Being free means being free to do bad as well as good.

So, firstly, bad things can happen because of bad people.

The second reason bad things happen is a bit more abstract.

When I was young I studied science. We learnt about all these laws or principles of nature which explain why things happen. Newton’s laws, Boyle’s law, Avogadro’s number and so on. The thing that strikes you about all these laws that have someone’s name attached to them is that the laws have always existed and that the person named only worked out what was going on and wrote down a definition. In reality these are all God’s laws. We live in a very orderly world and universe. The universe, our world and life itself would not be possible without a framework of laws and constants

The laws of nature can be very useful. Take the law of gravity. Did any of you see the recent movie entitled "Gravity"? In this film Sandra Bullock and George Clooney were lost in space and spent a lot of time floating around and bumping into things because they were experiencing a situation of zero gravity with nothing to keep them anchored.

So gravity is very handy, keeping our feet on the ground but if we jump off a 6 storey building gravity is probably going to kill us.

The laws of nature can cause natural disasters. When two tectonic plates move against each other earthquakes or tidal waves can occur. When the ocean gets warm it causes weather patterns which may develop into hurricanes. The process of cell division which goes on all the time in our bodies and which we rely on for maintenance and repair can go wrong and a cancer occurs.

Again it can be asked why does God not intervene? Because if the laws of nature were not consistent we would no longer live in an orderly universe where we can understand and, we hope, manage our environment. For example scientists can work out the mechanism of a disease and a cure can be devised only because the processes of the body are consistent and able to be understood and predicted.

Because the laws of nature are reliable and consistent when something happens that breaches these laws we term it a miracle. By definition a miracle is something that defies the laws of nature and is very rare.

To summarise. I have said that the reasons bad things happen to good people are due to the actions of bad people or the effect of a law of nature. I have also said that God allows people free will giving us the choice of doing good or evil. Furthermore God has created a universe which operates under principles which are consistent and which we can understand and work with.

So am I saying that God is helpless? That his hands are tied by the rules which he has created for mankind and the universe?

By no means! The main way God has of helping the victims of persecution or natural disasters is through the work of good people. You will remember the reading we had a few weeks ago about separating the sheep from the goats at

the day of judgement. We will be judged by how we have carried out the Fathers will by being the body of Christ in the world. When disaster strikes who is first to help? Christian organisations like The Red Cross or World Vision. And, Jesus promised that he would be with his followers through the Holy Spirit to be their counsellor and comforter.

So what is the place of prayer?

When Esther faced a situation which required her to risk her life to save her people she had the backing of prayer and with courage and wisdom she prevailed.

When we pray for someone in trouble a number of things happen.

One. We can ask for a miracle. As I have said miracles are rare but we know that miracles do happen and many Christians will testify to this.

Two. We are saying to the person we are praying for “We empathise with you and we stand beside you and support you and we are asking for God’s help for you”

Three. We have the promise of the Holy Spirit to give courage and wisdom. In prayer we can ask for the Spirit’s help both for the person in trouble and for ourselves so that we know what to do to assist.

Recently, Joan and I had the experience of having the St Johns prayer chain behind us in a family crisis. Thankyou – we are so grateful.

Returning to where I started. I did not know what I should say today and prayed, O God – help! Through circumstances I found a message to pass on to you. A cynic would say – just a coincidence, I believe otherwise.