

Higher Thoughts and Greater Purposes

In the name of him who does all things well, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: In today's Old Testament reading the prophet Isaiah reminds us that the thoughts and ways of the Lord far surpass all human understanding. And it's a good thing that he does remind us because it's usually the first thing that we forget when things aren't going the way we think they should. In our sinful pride we want to be in total control of our lives. We want to know precisely what's going on and why. We think that we ought to be able to understand everything that the Lord does, and that he owes us a complete, curiosity-satisfying explanation *in advance* for all the things that happen. And when we don't get it, we become upset. I mean, how many times have you found yourself asking, "Lord, why are you doing this to me?" or "Why did you let this happen?" or "Why are you letting this go on?" And of course, implied in these questions is the accusation that whatever it is he's doing, is wrong. It's not the way *I* would have done it—which is only to say that I'm wiser and more inclined to do what's best than the Lord himself. Now that's pride with a capital P. It's precisely to attack and destroy this kind of pride that the Lord often acts in ways that are surprising, shocking, or counterintuitive to us. He acts in ways that seem wrong to us; but they are ways that, when he grants deeper spiritual insight, reveal the Lord's infinitely superior wisdom and grace.

A good example of this is the parable Jesus gives in today's Gospel reading. In it we have the account of a vineyard owner who has what strikes us as an unfair pay scale for his employees. We believe in equal pay for equal work, and so it's only right that those who work longer and accomplish more should get paid more. It's what drives the capitalist spirit that makes our economy go. But that isn't how the Lord operates in his kingdom. The mistake is thinking that the end reward has anything at all to do with the amount of work you do. The general gist of the parable is that the Lord gives us the kingdom of heaven by his grace through faith in the work that Jesus did for us. So, whether we are Christians called to faith from infancy who spend our whole lives supporting the work and ministry of the Church or we are deathbed converts who are called to faith in the last hour of life, the same glorious reward awaits us all. And trust me, no one there will be complaining about deserving more than the next guy because everyone will understand that if we got what we deserved, we wouldn't be there in the first place. So no, God's ways are not our ways. And we should be very thankful that they're not.

Today's Epistle lesson contains a number of other examples of the Lord accomplishing his will in ways that on the surface don't seem right to us. And what I'd like to do is spend some time examining them in order to reinforce this idea that we know and yet find so hard to accept: that his ways are not our ways. The goal is that by seeing several more examples of the Lord bringing good from what appears to be bad or unfair, we might better learn to trust him at all times and commend ourselves into his loving hands regardless of what happens. You see, none of us knows what the Lord has in store for us in this life, or what hardships and trials we may have to face; nor in this life will we be likely able to see or understand all that the Lord means to accomplish by them. But if we believe the general principle: that God is at work in all things, the good and the bad that happens, to bring about the best for the people who love and trust him, we don't have to see or understand what he's up to at any given moment or in the midst of any crisis. It's enough to know that he's got it under control, that he knows what he's doing, and that his good and gracious will for us is being done.

With this in mind, let's turn to today's Epistle, which comes from Paul's letter to the church he was largely responsible for planting in the city of Philippi in Macedonia. Paul writes this letter from Rome where he is being held under guard as he awaits trial for a crime he allegedly committed in Jerusalem several years earlier. To be specific, he is accused of inciting a riot. What happened is that Paul spoke to a crowd of his countrymen about Jesus the Savior and how he (Paul) had been appointed by Christ to spread the Gospel to the Gentiles. On hearing this, his Gentile-hating Jewish audience came unhinged and started a violent uproar. Roman guards had to take Paul into protective custody to keep him from being pulled apart by the angry mob. The point is that Paul was innocent. Just because someone says something you don't like doesn't give you the right to go on a rampage destroying property and trying to kill people (a universal truth that someone should explain to many of the world's Muslims and college students here in America). In any case, because his enemies kept coming up with more false charges against him and because they kept bribing and manipulating the authorities in Judea to have him condemned, it became impossible for him to get a fair hearing. So Paul decided that his best course of action was to take advantage of his Roman citizenship and make an appeal directly to the Emperor, which was every Roman citizen's right.

The downside of this was that altogether Paul spent upwards of four long years in prison: two in Caesarea of Judea and two more in Rome before his case was heard. And *that*, from the perspective of the Christians at Philippi, was about as disastrous as it could be for the early church and the cause of the Gospel. I mean, think about it: this was Paul, the great lion of God, the man more responsible than anyone for the spread of the Gospel on two continents and half a dozen islands. He had been a whirlwind of evangelistic activity. The Holy Spirit had used him to plant more churches in more places than the other twelve apostles of Jesus combined. Just imagine what more he might be able to accomplish if he were free. And that's not all he could be doing. The churches he started were all undergoing growing pains. There were unresolved issues, doctrinal disturbances, misunderstandings of all kinds. They wanted Paul to return in order to straighten out some of these things. But no, he sits uselessly under arrest waiting for trial – a trial, I should add, at which he might very well be condemned to death. Oh yes, his enemies had followed him to Rome and were using every dirty trick in the book to influence the outcome of the case. So in addition to the sense that Paul's confinement was wasting the church's single greatest human resource, there was a lot of heartfelt personal concern for this man they loved.

So, the congregation at Philippi had taken up a collection and sent Paul a gift to help pay for his defense and for expenses related to his ongoing confinement. Back in those days, prisoners had to pay for their own food, clothing, and other comforts. In addition to that, in Paul's case, he was being held under house arrest, so he had a rented home to pay for as well. And in reading Paul's letter, you get the sense that their much-needed gift arrived at a critical time. He was very grateful for it. But along with their gift, either by messenger or by letter, Paul learned that the church members were asking all those hard questions: "This is just terrible. It's so unfair and wrong. We are all so worried about you, Paul. Why is the Lord allowing this to happen to you – and to us also since we need you? What good can possibly come of it?"

The Epistle reading is Paul's response to these hard questions. And what he says, in a nutshell, is what looks so bad and tragic to you is actually working out for the good of the Gospel. He then begins to list some of the ways that the Lord is using what appears to be a bad situation to further the cause of Christ.

First, he says, the truth of the Gospel is being spread among the Praetorian Guard. That was the Emperor's own elite military force that guarded the palace and was responsible for

security in Rome. Paul had at least two of these soldiers with him around the clock. And, of course, they would have worked in shifts and according to some kind of rotation as different units were assigned to pull his guard duty. So, over the course of a month several dozen soldiers might have to sit with Paul. And even though *he* couldn't go anywhere, other people were free to come to him. And so, Paul did a tremendous amount of teaching while under arrest. And the whole time he's teaching, these Roman soldiers are forced to sit there and listen. As a result, many became Christians. And even those who didn't become Christians came to understand that Paul was a harmless teacher of a peaceful religion, and that the charges against him were false. And, of course, soldiers talk to each other; so the impact of his teaching went far beyond those who actually guarded him. So, Paul's confinement was allowing him to spread the Gospel in the very heart of the capital of the Empire among some of its key functionaries. And though Paul doesn't mention it here, it may have occurred to you that later when Christians were being persecuted in Rome, it would have been the Praetorian Guard that was largely responsible for carrying out the arrests and punishments. So ask yourself, how diligently a soldier who had become a Christian or who was at least sympathetic to the faith would carry out such orders? Why, they'd be in a position to give advance warning of impending arrests. How many Christians in the years to come do you suppose escaped punishment or death on account of having sympathizers in the Praetorian Guard? The Lord works in mysterious ways indeed.

A second benefit of his being constantly guarded was that his enemies couldn't get to him. When Paul was free, his life was constantly threatened by those who wanted him dead and who were willing to do whatever it took to make him that way. Just to give you an idea of the level of their hostility, at one point forty assassins took a sacred oath neither to eat nor drink anything until they had murdered Paul. Paul got away that time. I don't know if the assassins kept their oath or not. We can only hope that they did; but I doubt it. Anyway, not even the toughest Jewish assassin would dare take on members of the Praetorian Guard. Even if he succeeded, the backlash against the Jewish community in Rome would have been frightful. So as long as he was in custody, Paul was free to write, to teach, and to study and his enemies couldn't touch him.

A third benefit of his incarceration that Paul mentions is that it emboldened other Christians to speak up about their faith in Jesus. When they saw what Paul was willing to endure for the sake of the Gospel, and when they felt the frustration that he was unable to go about freely spreading the Good News, they said to themselves, "If he's not afraid to suffer, why should I be? And since he can't speak publicly, I will." So Paul's limitations pushed others to go beyond their usual comfort zones. It's the same kind of thing that happens today on a smaller scale when congregations have a pastoral vacancy and the elders and other members have to do what normally they count on the pastor to do. As undesirable as vacancy is, it causes people to grow and take on roles they wouldn't otherwise. In Paul's case, he's saying that instead of just me out there spreading the Word, *many* are taking up the task and doing it, so that the net result is that more people are hearing the Gospel. In fact, in the verses the Epistle reading skipped over, Paul says that he had rivals in the church who were jealous of his popularity and accomplishments, and that they were working harder to take advantage of his confinement to play catch up, so to speak, and earn greater names for themselves in the field of evangelism. And Paul says, "I don't care. Yes, their motivation is messed up; but what does it matter as long as they are preaching Christ?"

Yet a fourth benefit of Paul's imprisonment was that it allowed him to serve the Church as a whole as an example of being patient and persevering while suffering for the Gospel. "I don't know what's going to happen to me", he writes, "but I'm not worried about it because I

know who's in charge. If I'm condemned and they kill me, I'll go be with Christ. I can't lose that way – in fact, I'm looking forward to it. If on the other hand I'm acquitted, and they set me free, I'll be able to go on serving you and the Church. I don't lose that way either. So, I have nothing to fear or lose and everything to gain whether I live or die. But since I think it would be better for you if the Lord allowed me to go on serving the Church, I believe *that* will be the outcome.” And the thing to understand here is that the church at Philippi was also undergoing hardship and persecution. So, imagine them receiving this letter brimming with Paul's confidence and peace of mind in the midst of his troubles, and how that would encourage them to face the trials that they were experiencing.

Finally, I'd like to add one more benefit that Paul does not mention of how his difficult circumstances helped the cause of Christ. It's his letter to Philippians itself along with several other letters that with it are now Books of the New Testament. If Paul had been free, he would not have reason to write them, and all the teaching, encouragement, correction, spiritual insight, and divine wisdom they contain and that have been building up and strengthening Christians in the faith for two thousand years – well, we wouldn't have them. A huge chunk of the New Testament canon wouldn't be there, and the Church of all ages would be the poorer for it.

But the Lord in his infinite wisdom knew what he was about and, as we have seen, used Paul's bad circumstances to bring about a great deal of good for his Church. I hasten to add that this isn't just Pollyanna optimism or spin-doctoring that attempts to find something positive to say when things are bad. No. This was God's plan all along. And certainly, he who brought good for all from the greatest evil and injustice of all time – the death of his Son – can bring good from the comparatively minor hardships and trials he calls upon us to face.

So, this is our confidence: that he is at all times and in every circumstance watching over us in love for Christ's sake. With his higher thoughts and ways, he is accomplishing his greater purpose in everything that happens, whether good or bad. Being confident of this, we don't need to know what, why, or how. Because his thoughts are so much higher, it stands to reason that most of the time we wouldn't understand it even if he explained it to us; but it's not important that we know – only that we trust him. And trusting in his love and wisdom we can, like Paul, possess the peace that passes all understanding, knowing that whatever happens in life or in death, we are the Lord's. May God grant us this perfect peace of mind, so that trusting in him we too may faithfully serve in the cause of Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!