

Changing

The horrific pictures from Ukraine are mind-numbing.

A pregnant woman dies because the maternity hospital she's in is bombed by Russia.

The world is right now focused on the one man responsible for all of this needless killing and destruction – yet Putin remains intent on his terrible schemes.

The folks walking with Jesus today ask Jesus about the smaller scale, yet no less terrible events, that just happened in Jerusalem.

Some of Jesus' country folk, Galileans, were in Jerusalem to offer sacrifice to God.

While there, another lost leader, Pilate, decides to execute these Galileans, mixing their human blood with the sacrificial blood of the animals.

And the question being asked is that silent question we all of us ask when something terrible happens to someone.

What did they do to deserve that?

What bad thing is this in payment of?

Our New Age thinking these days chocks such bad things up to karma.

It's almost impossible NOT to wonder such things, because we are hard wired, it seems, to see life in terms of cause and effect.

Of just desserts.

That the piper must be paid.

When my wife Isa was dying of cancer, a mere 38 years old, how often did we both secretly ask ourselves: "Are we being punished?"

There are mountains of books and lectures trying to answer that heart wrenching question: why do bad things happen to good people?

But when Jesus comes face to face with this question, pay attention to what he doesn't do.

He doesn't go in for a long explanation about why God allows such things.

He doesn't talk about some kind of hidden wisdom or divine plan.

He simply tells the folks who are asking these questions to stop.

Stop looking for explanations for life's tragedies.

Stop trying to assign divine reasons for earthly catastrophes.

Instead, he says, figure out how to bring divine wisdom to this earthly life.

And to do that, we must repent.

Which doesn't mean "clean up your act."

Nor is it about guilt tripping yourself for doing bad things.

"Repent" as Jesus uses it doesn't even mean 'change the direction in which you're looking for happiness,' although it's often translated that way." Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*, 37.

No, as you know, "repent" — in the Greek "Metanoia" — means: to enter into the larger mind — of God.

And maybe we need to stop right there for a second.

After all, who's willing to go there these days?

Who's willing to live with mystery, uncertainty, contingency?

The exact opposite is what these days are known for!

Certainty!

Black and white thinking!

My way or the highway!

So perhaps the first step in this journey of entering into the larger mind begins not so much with our minds, as with our fists.

As in, unclenching them.

And perhaps next comes our breath.

Releasing the temptation to use our breath to blow holes in others' arguments.

Instead, simply focusing on inhaling.

Then exhaling.

Whenever and wherever we breathe like that, whether we know it or not, we're standing with Moses, marveling at the burning bush.

Because the name God shares with Moses is the very sound of our breath.

I Am, in Hebrew, is spelled Y H W H.

It's not a pronounceable word.

Instead, the sound of these letters, when you try to speak them, is the sound of your breath.

We breathe the breath of God – and in that mystery our life unfolds.

During World War II, a brilliant theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, argued that the United States had a moral obligation to fight the Nazis.

He criticized as naive, and even dangerous, those who said Christianity must reject war in all circumstances.

Flash forward 75+ years.

We live in a country armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons capable of destroying all life on earth.

In the 1950's, the parting words of the retiring president and former 5 star General Dwight Eisenhower, were a stark warning about the power of the military industrial complex, a complex in its infancy.

A complex now monstrous in size.

Today, we stand at the very brink of a nuclear conflagration as Russia pummels Ukraine and a great many cry out for vengeance, even if that means nuclear war.

So the question Jesus poses to all of us is: what does the larger mind say about power?

To put a finer point on it, do we Christians really believe what we pray every week?

Do we believe that all authority in heaven and on earth belongs to the crucified one?

Do we believe that in order to find our life, we must lose it, for the sake of Christ and his gospel?

Do we believe we must love our enemy, and pray for our persecutors?

In short, are we a fig tree that is bearing fruit?

Or are we simply, bare?

Jesus describes a fruitful life in another gospel, as he shares with us what doing God's will looks like:

"For this is my Father's will, that all who see his Son and believe in him should have eternal life." Jn 6:40.

What is it to believe in Jesus?

It's not a head thing.

It's not a "signing on the dotted line" or simply "saying it" thing.

It's a life-changing thing.

To "believe in Jesus" is to sign on to this great adventure we are all invited to be part of, and to sign on with mind, body and soul!

And when we do, we come to see that "there are two sets of principles.

They're the principles of power and privilege — and the principles of truth and justice.

If you seek truth and justice, it will always mean letting go of power and privilege.

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We live in a world in which power and privilege is the air we breathe, the water we drink.

People either have it and cling to it or seek it with abandon.

Only the few reject it, almost always at great cost.

Like that brave Russian TV editor who seized the moment last week, urging her nation to reject Putin’s propaganda.

Which is why the heart of our faith, indeed, the source of our faith, is scandal.

Everything you’ve heard today, from the readings to this homily, are intended to scandalize.

To incite.

To challenge.

How else can God choose to make a crucified criminal the ruler of all of creation?

Thus, the many ordinary people following Jesus today are left befuddled and upset by Jesus today.

And similarly, some listening today may be irked that the military industrial complex, that so many Americans worship, has been called into question.

There’s a reason that scandal is the lifeblood of the gospel, the very fuel for the ministry of Jesus.

Without scandal, there is no faith.

Scandal breaks us out of our socially acceptable, make-no-waves, blinders.

And even though scandal may not lead us to fully embrace the kingdom of God, at least it has the chance to lead us to faith.

If this is hard to take, or even understand, it's okay!

You're in great company!

Listen to this prayer by one of the great religious thinkers of the last 200 years.

"God in heaven, I thank you for not requiring a person to understand Christianity, for if that were required I would be the most miserable of all.

The more I seek to understand it, the more incomprehensible it becomes...

Therefore, I thank you for requiring — not understanding — but faith.

And I pray that you will continue to increase that faith." Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, paraphrased.

In these days when the whole world seems to be coming apart at the seams, can we trust the scandal that is our Lord?

Can we trust the mystery?

Can we trust the uncertainty?

For in scandal and mystery and uncertainty is true love and true light.

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