

## *4 Sunday of Lent; A*

**My Dear Brothers and Sisters,**

In the ancient world, it was generally believed that human suffering was a direct punishment from God for wrongdoing. This concept is reflected in our gospel reading for today.

Jesus and his disciples saw a man who had been born blind, and the disciples wondered whether the blindness was caused by his own sin or by his parents'. Jesus replied that it was neither one, **“Rather, it was to let God’s work show forth in him.”** If I understand that, the Lord was saying that human suffering can bring honor and glory to God.

And that seems like a strange thing to say. As they see it, human suffering either denies the existence of God or else dishonors him if he does exist. One of the philosophers said: **“The world in which we live can be understood as a result of accident, but if it is the outcome of purpose, the purpose must have been that of a friend.”** News commentator Walter Lippmann said, **“Nothing puts a greater strain on the faith of the common man than the existence of utterly irrational suffering of the suffering.”**

Well, what could seem more irrational than for a baby to be born blind? And here is Jesus saying that **“it was to let God’s works show forth in him.”**

And we need to be careful here. Keep in mind that Jesus did not say that God caused the man to be born blind. I guess we could read that into it, but we would be wrong. The God I believe in does not impose

suffering upon little children. I don't know why some babies are born blind. I don't know what causes much of the suffering. Some of it we bring on ourselves. Sometimes we inflict it on others. But of this much I am confident - God does not arbitrarily impose suffering upon his children.

So, let's get that clear in our minds. Jesus did not say that God caused the man to be born blind. He did say that God's work could show forth in him as a result of his blindness. And that is what we are dealing with today - How can human suffering bring honor and glory to God?

In our reading, the answer to that question seems fairly obvious. Jesus healed the man and gave him his sight.

A miracle like that would certainly seem **“to let God's works show forth.”** But some people did not see it that way. With the Pharisees, it became a source of religious controversy. They were not at all pleased that the man had received his sight. Their concern was that the healing had taken place on the Sabbath, and this they did not like. If someone is determined not to see the works of God, no amount of miracles can change his mind.

But for the man himself, it was truly a miracle. He did not understand it, but he was grateful for it, and he bowed down and worshipped at the feet of the Lord.

When blindness is healed, when sickness is cured, when suffering is alleviated, surely this brings glory to God. But what about the people

who don't get well? What about the deformities that are not healed? Can this ongoing suffering in any way show forth the works of God?

The answer to that, it seems to me, is one unqualified **“Yes.”** This is not to suggest that I enjoy human suffering, either in myself or in my fellowman. I resent it and shrink from it just like everyone else. But therein lies a mystery — this thing that we run from and seek to avoid, when handled well, often brings out the best that is in us.

I often wonder if John Milton could have written with such insight if he had not been blind. Would Beethoven have composed as beautifully if he had not been deaf? We cannot answer either question, but we do know that both men took their respective handicaps and used them to enrich the world. Surely, that shows forth the works of God.

Let me quote from a woman who was not only blind but also deaf. She was not born that way. But in early childhood, a serious illness cost her both of these vital senses. Her name was Helen Keller.

In one of her many inspirational speeches, she made this statement: **“Faith has made my limitations ineffectual, if not trivial. And since I have the privilege of doing so, I am proud to bear witness to the power of faith. Faith is the red blood that braces when all else fails. Through faith alone can I fulfill the two senses I lack — sight and hearing. Faith has the ingenuity to bring me insight, and I know where I am going. I walk unafraid toward the enchanted wood where the foliage is always green, where joys abide, where**

**nightingales nest and sing, and where life and death are one in the presence of the Lord.”**

Think of a woman who can neither see nor hear her audience, standing and talking like that. Then try to convince me that such a person does not show forth the works of God.

**My Dear Brothers and Sisters,**

I hate human suffering. We should do everything in our power to prevent it and ease it. But if it comes and will not go away, if we have the courage and faith, it can be used to the glory of God. **Amen.**