

## 2019 17<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY

The stories within the Book of Genesis- the first Book of the Bible- are inspired by God to help us grapple with fundamental questions like 'What is God like?', 'Why do bad things happen?' 'What is life all about?'

The story we have just heard of Abraham pleading with God to save Sodom and Gomorrah if Abraham could find just one just person within the cities, underlines with large, bold strokes several important moral principles.

The first is that it is always wrong to punish the innocent. One way of doing this is when we punish a whole crowd of people. We know some are guilty but we don't not know who- so we punish the lot. Punishing en masse satisfies our desire for vengeance. But it is wrong because innocent people are made to suffer along with the guilty.

Abraham knows that God is just and will not punish Sodom and Gomorrah if just one righteous person is found within them. Because there will always be at least one righteous person within any city, the author of the Book of Genesis is teaching us that disasters like the Christchurch Earthquakes can never be acts of God.

More likely- God knew that the volcanoes on which Sodom and Gomorra were built were about to explode and God wished to warn the people to flee. Because Abraham's heart was attuned to God's voice, God was able to warn Abraham of what was to happen and surely Abraham would have shared this knowledge with other citizens. But their hearts were closed to God's voice and they ignored the warning.

Disasters and Wars are not God's punishment on people for sinning. They are evil. No evil comes from God. To say so is false theology.

I remember well how Melissa, a solo mother, living alone with her 8 week old baby in a tiny flat in Hamilton East was visited by a couple of fundamentalist Christians. Melissa was exhausted. Her baby had colic and she hadn't slept properly for weeks. The baby was crying, crying, crying. So she poured out her heart to the two Christians. They promptly told her that her baby's colic was God's punishment on her for her sin of Fornication and that all would be well just as soon as she got down on her knees and repented of her sin.

Melissa was upset by this and came to the presbytery for guidance. I reminded Melissa that God loved her deeply and also loved her baby. Thousands in Melissa's position would have had an Abortion but she had cherished her baby. And so we prayed together- giving God thanks for the baby. A lady from the Parish then drove Melissa and her baby to a doctor. And all was well.

But how wrong it was to accuse God of making a baby sick in order to punish its mother! It is an abhorrent theology. As bad as believing that God uses a volcano to destroy a township to punish the people.

When I was the Principal of Marist High School in American Samoa, one of my staff members was Lucy from Canada. Lucy was in her early 30's and a woman we all loved.

But one day Lucy came to my Office in tears. Her Year 10 class had been unspeakably rude and defiant to her. I hit the roof. I immediately burst into their classroom and told them some very basic home truths. School finished at 2.30pm. They would be writing lines until 4.30pm. To my shame, I did not bother finding out who was responsible. As far as I was concerned they were all too blame and all got punished. Those who lived on the far side of the Island didn't arrive home that night until 6.00pm.

At the time I felt justified. And it worked. For the rest of the year those Year 10 boys behaved appropriately for Miss Lucy.

But I sense that there will be a number of men- now in their 60's- who will remember that day with anger. They had done nothing disrespectful to Miss Lucy. They had been punished unjustly by their Catholic Principal. Maybe when they think back on their days at Marist that is one of the few incidents they remember. We don't forget injustices to ourselves.

Ten years ago when I returned to American Samoa for a reunion, I had in the back of my mind the hope that one of those boys would confront me and I would have the opportunity to say 'Sorry'.

And the same principle applies in families. A beautiful cup is broken from the tea-set given to parents at their Wedding. It must have been one of the kids who did it. But no one owns up. So Dad packs them all off to bed early.

An injustice has been done. And now it is Dad who needs to say 'Sorry'.

The great story of Abraham bargaining with God has been a spring board for mankind's reflection upon the nature of God.

This reflection came to its maturity with the teachings of Christ. Jesus told us that God is our Father. “Ask and it will be given to you. Knock and the door will be opened to you.”

God is all-forgiving. As St Paul reminded us today in his Letter to the Colossians: Christ has cancelled every record of the debt that we had to pay to God because of our sins; He has done away with this debt by nailing it to the Cross.

And just as God is forever merciful, so must we be to those who anger us—particularly our pupils, our children and our grandchildren.