

Our Providential God

We walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 5:7)

Many people believe that everything happens for a reason. I think this sentiment is related to a fundamental trust that God is in control and that human lives are neither random nor meaningless. Sometimes we draw on this belief as we try to make sense of a tragedy. I certainly hope that none of us views his or her life as utterly ungrounded or untethered from God's care. But actually believing that God is pulling every string or that everything that happens is ultimately good is fraught with enormous difficulties. What about human freedom? Does not sin mean that I have chosen against God's will, that I have opted for chaos and not divine order? Such a dictum can also lead us to seek reasons for incidents that have no reason, especially tragedies or horrifying moral evil.

Having said this, we can still take divine providence seriously. That is, we ought to believe that God is in fact guiding our lives, the church and indeed the world toward his purposes. Consider it "big picture" providence. But big-picture providence does not mean that God is not intimately part of our lives here and now. The twofold confidence that God is with us here as well as broadly drawing all things to his ends are what today's Scriptures witness to.

Paul tells the Corinthians in today's reading, "We walk by faith, not by sight." This faith is not ungrounded in our experience; it is consonant with a living knowledge of God in our lives. Earlier in 2 Corinthians Paul writes, "All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory" (3:18). Experiencing a foretaste of God's glory not only supports our faith but shows us a glimpse of the glory to which God is guiding us.

Paul ends today's passage with the exhortation to "aspire to please him," reminding us of the sobering fact that "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ." I see here the insight that in order for us to live wholeheartedly in harmony with God's providential care, we ought to strive to follow God's will. It reminds me of something

the late renowned mythologist Joseph Campbell often taught: When you are following your bliss, then invisible hands will guide you along the right path. By "bliss" he was not referring to some emotional or spiritual high. Rather, he was talking about realizing one's deepest truth, which is the same as God's truth implanted in us.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus offers two comparisons about planting and fruition. In the first, he compares our experience of the kingdom of God to the experience of a farmer who scatters seeds and later, without understanding how it happened, finds the seeds grown to produce a harvest. In the second, he compares the kingdom to a mustard seed, which is among the smallest seeds but produces an unusually large bush.

I do not know how God's grace works. Sometimes I craft what I consider a perfect lecture and get a "ho-hum" response from my students. At other times, a side comment of mine produces a revelation for a student, who will write me years later and thank me for "that insight that changed my life." This does not mean, of course, that I have a license to be slack in my preparation, as if that didn't matter. But it does mean that I am not in control of the kingdom. None of us are. We should always "aspire to please him," and this means being intentional and responsible. Beyond that, we scatter seeds and can only be surprised by how things come to fruition.

We can also nurture hope that small beginnings can have amazing outcomes. Jesus' ministry must have looked like a disaster to an outsider. He converted very few who heard him, and even his disciples remained relatively clueless throughout his ministry. But, of course, his ministry brought about the salvation of the world. The kingdom is God's providence in action.

Praying with Scripture

- Ask God to reveal your bliss.
- Are you putting impediments in your path?
- Where have God's invisible hands helped?

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