

13<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time  
June 28, 2009  
Fr. Tom Elliott

## Theodicy

Wisdom 1:13-15; 2:23-24  
Psalm 30  
2 Corinthians 8:7, 9, 13-15  
Mark 5:21-43

I recently finished reading, Left to Tell, by Immaculée Ilibagiza. Some of you might remember Immaculée's story; I mentioned it in a homily last year. Along with a handful of other women, Immaculée spent several months hiding in a small bathroom in order to survive the Rwandan holocaust. As I read her story, I was amazed at how God had strengthened her faith in His goodness and the inherent goodness of humanity even in the midst of the very real and incarnate evil that was going on around her. While she never used the word "theodicy" in her book, Immaculée had to grapple with it in order to deepen her faith.

The word "theodicy" comes from the Greek *θεός*, meaning God, and *δίκη*, meaning justice or justification. The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism defines theodicy as "the attempt to justify belief in the goodness of God in the face of the evil and suffering in the world." In other words, every religion that believes in a good God is faced with the task of explaining how there can be evil and suffering in the world. Our Scripture readings today give us a wonderful opportunity to explore our Christian theodicy.

The book of Wisdom was written close to the time of Christ, about 100 years before His birth. Because of this, our first reading today shows us a fairly well-developed Jewish theodicy. It shows a definite movement away from the earliest theodicies in Judaism, which tended to explain evil as the lack of goodness in humans or as God's punishment. In the book of Wisdom, we read about death, evil, and suffering being something contrary to God and contrary to God's creation, including humanity.

The creatures of the world are wholesome.... For God formed man to be imperishable; the image of his own nature he made him. But by the envy of the devil, death entered the world, and they who are in his possession experience it.

-Wisdom 1:14b, 2:23-24

In Catholicism, and most other mainline Christian communities, there are four popular explanations of evil and suffering. While all of them help us intellectually grapple with the problem of evil, none of them provide a sufficient answer. First, God gave us free will. This means that every time a human being chooses to be something other than what God created him or her to be, or whenever a human being chooses to misuse another part of God's creation, sin and evil are manifested. Since God desires to love us and have us love Him, and since freewill is a requirement for true love, then evil is sometimes caused because of our misuse of freewill.

Two other explanations of evil are connected and have to do with our limited understanding of events and God's incomprehensibility. In the words of God through the prophet Isaiah, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways... As high

as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9). Most of us will readily admit that we are amazed how God often is able to bring amazing results out of the most heinous of events. This is a reminder to us that God knows more than we know about the existence of evil in the world. While we trust that God does not cause the evil, we struggle to comprehend how He is able to use it for our benefit.

Lastly, the “unfinished” nature of the world often brings about evil. For example, the movement of the earth’s crust and hurricanes are both important earthly functions, yet they can both cause extraordinary suffering. Sometimes that suffering is so extreme that we talk about it as being “evil.”

As I mentioned a moment ago, none of these explanations adequately answer the problem of evil and suffering. Part of the reason why it is difficult to find an answer to the problem of evil is because evil is not *something*, but rather, a *lack* of something. Evil is a deprivation of good. Saint Augustine was the most influential proponent of this definition of evil. Something can be referred to as “evil,” when it does not live up to its nature, as God created it to be, or when it keeps something else from living up to its God-created nature. Something is evil when it parts from its nature, norm, order, or character. It is actually a movement toward non-being, corruption, lack, and privation. In this way, evil really has no nature. The only *real* things in life are those that are good.

Maybe this is why Immaculée was able to spiritually and psychologically survive the Rwandan holocaust—she chose to focus, not on the evil around her, but rather, on what was *most real*, her relationship with God. It is in that relationship that God renews our awareness of His goodness, humanity’s inherent goodness, and His desire to use all things for our eternal benefit.

### **SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:**

- ✚ Of the four most popular approaches to the question of theodicy (human free will, limited human understanding of events, the incomprehensibility of God, and the “unfinished” nature of the world), which best describes your own approach to explaining evil?
- ✚ Think of a concrete example of evil that has personally impacted your life. Asking for the Holy Spirit’s guidance and help, think of at least three good things that God was able to bring out of the evil situation. You might want to spend a few minutes giving thanks to God for those good things.