
God is in control

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 16 February 2025

Jeremiah 17:5-10 • 1 Corinthians 1:25-29 • Luke 6:20-26



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

The message of the readings today is quite clear: trust in God and it will go well for you. Turn away from God, and everything will go wrong. Jeremiah was living in a time when the people of Israel were turning away from God, and worshipping false gods, ones who could not help them or care for them or protect them — because those false gods were made by human hands. They were just statues. They did not represent anything real. Yet the Israelites again and again turned away from God. Jeremiah is sent by God to try to turn them back to the worship of the true God, our God who is love and Spirit.

God tells Jeremiah that he will act: “I will bless the person who puts his trust in me ... [but] I will condemn those who turn away from me.” The thing is, God is so forgiving, and gives us so many chances to do right, that it becomes easy for people to say that there is no God. Far be it from me to sound as if I’m blaming

God for this — not at all. We humans are to blame. The writers of the psalms often asked the question, “How long, O Lord?”, as in this passage from Psalm 13:

How long must I endure trouble?
How long will sorrow fill my heart day and night?
How long will my enemies triumph over me? (Psalm 13:2)

God chooses when to act, and often we humans get impatient: How long, O Lord? We look at wars in distant lands, and terrible things in our own country. We pray for God to bring peace to the world, but it doesn't seem to come.

So it's easy for a Christian to get discouraged. And for a non-Christian, it's easy to say God doesn't exist, because, see, he's not doing anything! Here are all these terrible things happening, and where is God?

But there is nothing new under the sun, and people have felt this way for many years. In the book of Ecclesiastes, attributed to King Solomon, he says:

I have also noticed that in this world you find wickedness where justice and right ought to be. I told myself, “God is going to judge the righteous and the evil alike, because every thing, every action, will happen at its own set time.” I decided that God is testing us, to show us that we are no better than animals. After all, the same fate awaits human beings and animals alike. One dies just like the other. They are the same kind of creature. A human being is no better off than an animal, because life has no meaning for either. [Eccl 3:16-19]

This is rather a dismal view! But this philosopher has hit on a truth: God has set everything to happen at its set time. That is a difficult truth, because many things which happen are not good things. Yet we must accept that we live in God's world, that we are created for God's purposes, and that all the things we have are given by God, and all the things we lose are taken by God.

When I was younger, before I accepted Christ as my Saviour, I fought against the idea of God. I looked at the bad things that happen to good people (that classic trope) and refused to accept the idea that I should worship a God who does cruel things, like letting planes crash and babies die. That I was free to choose God or not is an idea I understand better now that I'm a Christian, but at the time, I asserted my right to deny God because I thought that I was a totally independent being, with no loyalty owed to anybody. I could do what I wanted. In my ignorance, I thought that I could choose the god who best pleased me — one who did the things I thought were right. In a reversal of Genesis, I was forming a god in my own image. Many non-Christians feel this way.

But since I've become a Christian, I realise that I am a creature of God, not the other way around. And the things that God does may not always suit me — but it's not my call. I have no basis to judge God. I can't say to God: “You

shouldn't have done that — that was wrong.” I am God's creation. As the Old Testament says, can the pot get angry with the potter for how it is formed?

In the Christian faith, there is a necessary element of acceptance that we are not in control. There will be things that we don't understand. There will be things that happen that we would rather not happen. Most of the bad things that happen are caused by people's wrongdoing, or mistakes. God will not always save people from themselves, or from other people. God will let things happen. Part of this is because God gives us free choice, to do as we please. Acts have consequences, but God does not generally prevent things from happening.

Part of it also is that God is complex, beyond our understanding. We see an apparent paradox: God loves us all, individually, personally, and completely. Yet God does not consider that the death of an individual is necessarily bad. For God looks at the overall picture: the entire world, the entire universe. But God shows his love in that he is with us always. The death of a loved one brings me grief, and God is with me in that grief, giving comfort and understanding. Jesus walks beside me in such times of trial: comforting, strengthening, helping me to endure the sorrow and pain.

The world, and our lives, are filled with joy and sorrow, beauty and ugliness. God is in control. We will not always have a smooth time, and things will go wrong. But at the end of our lives, we will know the joy of God's embrace. Until then, our job is to believe in God through Christ, and accept that Jesus is our king, in this strange, terrible, wonderful life on earth, with the hope of endless life in the eternal city.