

B Epi 06
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RCL

What We Want And What God Wants

These are scary times we are living in. We are experiencing the economic difficulties that our parents and grandparents experienced in the Great Depression. We live with daily uncertainty as to job, income, investments, security of all sorts. We have to learn to live on less, no matter what our income has been for the past several years. And our concern is not for ourselves alone. No one with a compassionate bone in his body can see the suffering of our neighbor and not be moved to compassion. Our phone in the church office rings often with people begging for help. Our soup kitchen now serves more than it ever has before. History tells us that economic hardships bring social upheaval. Peoples' desperations turn to violence and target unpopular minorities as a way to try to cope. We have but to remember the Nazi targeting of Jews as the cause of the economic collapse after World War I to know the temptation we face in social confusion. You and I worry about our fiscal stability, our health insurance, the debt we're creating for our children, the threat of global warming and the upheavals *that* will bring. Here in our parish, it looks like the day school may be closing its doors for lack of pupils, and we derive a significant part of our parish income from that rental. A yawning pit has opened before us, and it is little exaggeration to say that the grave seems not all that far away, as our Psalm says this morning (30.3).

It is worth noting, of course, that we are not the first generation to deal with calamity. History shows us over and over that communities have had to deal with economic and social distortions of all sorts. Our Bible is rife with examples of disasters that come even to God's chosen people, both old and new covenants. Our ancestors in the faith endured famine, slavery, exile, persecution, execution. Even worse, in those difficulties they felt that God had abandoned them, and that was the unkindest cut of all.

I recite all this, not to depress us, but to ground our reflections this morning in the reality that we are living. Preachers have sometimes been accused of preaching pie-in-the-sky, focusing on the hereafter while the here is falling apart. I want to be realistic as we look around us and try to divine meaning and strength for our lives.

For there is meaning, comfort, and strength in our God, in His Messiah, and in Christ's community, the Church. We have said before and it bears repeating that Christians are optimists at heart. How could it be otherwise, when we belong to a Lord who has conquered the worst that can happen to us – death – His own death and our death. If Christ is Lord of death, He must as well be Lord of all that is less than death. So Jesus is Lord of all that confronts us today, and as He once brought resurrection into a world that

had never seen it before, so He will bring resurrection into these lesser deaths that we are now enduring.

But we must be realistic in our optimism. Resurrection does not necessarily mean that we will be saved *from* our difficulties but rather *through* our difficulties. The Lord Jesus once said that we must have trust so as to move mountains (Matthew 17.20, 21.21), and so we must, but that is not the whole story. For the Lord Jesus had trust beyond anything that we can ever know, and His request in the Garden of Gethsemane that the bitter cup of suffering and death pass from Him was not granted. God asked Him to accept the humiliating death of a Roman cross, a mystery that two thousand years later we are still trying to decode. What we do know is that, far from avoiding death, Jesus conquered through His death by coming into resurrection.

What does all this mean for us today? Is it really good news? I think so. We have to understand God's spiritual realities in order to live in faith and trust and confidence.

Charles Darwin, whose two hundredth birthday we celebrate this week as well as the magnificence of his intellectual achievement in formulating the concept of evolution, lost his faith in God, not because of his evolutionary ideas but because his eldest daughter died when she was only ten years old. Darwin was devastated, though his wife coped quite well and was a devoted child of the Church of England all her life. What happened to Darwin? I think he placed his faith and trust in God in the wrong place. Essentially, Darwin said to God, "I will trust You if you save my child." He should have said, "I will trust You even if my child dies." The difference is where we place our trust, in God Himself or in what God can do for us. It's all right to ask God for healing from leprosy, to keep one's job, to save one's marriage, to keep us in good health, to let us live a little longer, to give food and rest to the needy. We see enough of God's activity in scripture and in our own lives to trust that God wants good things for us, not bad. As St James says in his New Testament letter, "There is no shadow, no darkness, in God." (James 1.17)

But healthy faith and trust is not in what we want God to do for us but rather in what God wants to do for us, as Jesus showed us in the Garden of Gethsemane. What He wanted was to avoid torture and death; what God wanted was to resurrect Jesus into new life and in the process save the world from its own selfishness, fear, incompleteness, and coming apart. "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." (Matthew 26.39) Jesus drank His Father's cup to the last bitter dregs on the Cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15.34) Through His trust, Jesus won new life, eternal life, glorious life, for Himself and for us. Jesus' trust was in God, not in God's responsiveness to His petition.

How about you and me? It's perfectly all right to ask for all the things we see as good in our lives and in our world: enough peace, enough food, enough health, enough wealth,

enough family, enough security, enough wisdom, enough life. This is the faith-moving-mountains stuff, and sometimes God is delighted to do those things for us. I hope that in our present crisis what we ask for is what we get.

But if God has something else in mind, if what He is doing is far greater than what we can conceive, as resurrection was far greater than escape from the cross, then I hope we have the trust, the faith, to say, "...yet not what I want but what you want."

That's what Jesus said and did. We can do no better. Amen.