

ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

“In All Things God Works for the Good”

Romans 8:28-30

The first verse of today’s epistle lesson confronts us with a rather astonishing and, for some, a rather incredible statement – “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Now, it’s not too astonishing or incredible to believe that God works for our good when things seem to be going our way but it is astonishing and incredible to believe that when things aren’t going our way. And as someone once said, “If God really works for our good, how comes there’s so much bad?” And that’s a good question. There sure is a lot of bad in this world. You can’t pick up a newspaper or news magazine, you can’t watch TV or listen to the radio, you can’t go online without seeing all the bad. In fact, at times it seems like there is nothing but bad. The economy is weak at best, the price of houses continues to decline even while the price of everything else continues to increase. Natural disasters abound, planes crash and hundreds are killed, we are at war within and without. Thousands are robbed, raped, shot, killed on a daily basis. Where is the good in all of that? And even in our own lives we see the bad. Families are in disarray, jobs are lost, health fails, friends and loved ones die, and the bad just keeps on coming. Where is the good in that?

If God is busy working out the good for those who love him, how come it seems that the bad is winning? Now, some would say we’re just too pessimistic – that we should just look on the bright side – that every cloud has a silver lining. But, in the end, such pious platitudes don’t really deal with the reality of the world in which we live nor the lives which we lead.

And if God is really working things out for the good of those who love him, why doesn’t he just eliminate the bad altogether? Why doesn’t he just make a heaven here on earth? Why doesn’t he just do away with the crashes and the bombs and the wars and the robbing, raping, shooting and killing? Why doesn’t he just eliminate the family problems, the job losses, the illnesses, and the deaths?

Perhaps the answer is to be found in this simple illustration. It’s said that many years ago a large diamond-in-the-rough was found in a certain African mine. The owner of the mine decided to give it to the king of England for a present for his crown. But before the king could mount it in his crown he sent it to a lapidary to cut it. And so the lapidary took it, studied it, notched it and then with a hard blow of the hammer cut it, and in the process, he made from that diamond-in-the-rough a diamond ready to be mounted in a king’s crown. So too, God allows the bad to exist so that like the hammer of a skilled lapidary, it may make us diamonds ready to be mounted in the crown of our King, God himself.

It is, I believe, for that very reason that God allows the bad to continue – not because he doesn't care or that he can't do anything about it – but so that he may show his great love to us by bringing about good – not just in spite of the bad but precisely because of the bad. And while we may wish that the bad simply didn't exist, we know it does and that it exists all around us and even in us. But for those who belong to God, who have been called according to his purpose, who believe and have been baptized into Christ's name and who trust in him as their personal Lord and Savior, and who seek to live out their calling and God's purpose in their lives day to day, the bad is not the last word. God's good is!

You see, God allows the bad so that he might work it out for our good. Time and time again I have seen that worked out not only in my life and in the life of my family but also in the lives of hundreds, even thousands, of parishioners over the years. God can bring good out of the bad. But the good does not always come automatically. For when the bad comes we are often faced with a choice. Will this bad drive me away from God or will it drive me closer to him? Will I simply blame God for the bad or will I see God for who he really is, the one who is a very present help in time of trouble? Will I seek to deal with the bad on my own or will I seek to deal with it using the very words and will of God himself? How we answer these and other such questions will go a long way to seeing God working for our good because, in the end, his good is only recognized and received by faith.

That's why the world cannot perceive the good that God is working because the world does not know him or the one he has sent, Jesus Christ. But we who do know him, who do know the one whom he has sent by faith, can both perceive and receive the good of God by faith.

And as we grow in faith we are able to perceive and receive the good all the more. For the good that God is working out for us in all things begins with our justification – that is, our salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. But it doesn't stop there – it continues in our sanctification – that is, as St. Paul says – our conformity to the very likeness of Christ himself. For just as God worked out all things for Jesus' good in the very midst of the bad so also God is at work now, working out all things for the good of those who are his in Christ.

In this way we are empowered, by faith, to see beyond the bad of this world to the good of God. And, in that, we are changed. Oh, the bad may not change but we are changed and as we are changed we are more and more able not only to see but also to receive the good of God in our own lives and, in that, to be instruments of that good in the lives of others.

Astonishing? Yes! Incredible? Sure! But it's true nonetheless. "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

May the God who loves us and who has called us according to his purpose bless us with good in all things and not just in spite of the bad but precisely through it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Let us pray. O most loving Father, you want us to give thanks for all things, to fear nothing except losing you, and to lay all our cares on you, knowing that you care for us. Protect us from faithless fears and worldly anxieties, and grant that no clouds in this mortal life may hide from us the light of your immortal love shown to us in your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.