

Did you know that someone took the piano bench from the church last month, sometime prior to the Saturday, 27th? It was worth about \$400, so it would be expensive to replace. It is something we used every time the piano was played, so I cannot wish the piano bench to find a better home: our church has been its best home.

I was wondering what God would do to the one who took it. The Psalmists do not seem to mince words, when they express their sentiments:

Psalms 10:15 - Break thou the arm of the wicked and evildoer; seek out his wickedness till thou find none.

Psalms 58:6 - O God, break the teeth in their mouths; tear out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD!

I do not imagine that I would wish such violence upon the guy who lifted our piano bench, but you get the idea: psalmists can become pretty graphic in their meditations before God.

And since the Psalmists have already laid the precedence, I feel justified to submit my modest wish: Arise, O Lord! Let thou flare up the most virulent and incurable boils on each cheek of the perp's posterior!

Now, I feel better already.

But I wonder: Does God actually punish people for their evil deeds and disobedience? Are the accidents and natural disasters the punishment of God for evil deeds and disobedience? 2010 Earthquake in Haiti; 2005 Katrina that sank New Orleans; 9/11 terrorist attack; AIDS for the homosexuals, etc.—were they God's punishments?

The ancients interpreted in their own particular ways the events recorded in the Bible. The Christians read the scriptures, and some of them reproduce the interpretive mentality/perspective that the ancients employed.

The biblical scriptures give excellent justification to one's vindictiveness. All one needs is

to do some interpretive work, in order to fit the occasion to what has been written. You can declare a war based on the scriptures, if you wanted to. You can justify just about anything you do through the authority of the scriptures.

That seems exactly to be the issue to which Jesus was referring in our reading today. Jesus pointed to the popular beliefs of the day: It was God's punishment that Galileans suffered at the hands of the Romans; it was God's punishment that the tower of Siloam fell upon the 18 people. Jesus refuted that they were the worse offenders than the rest of the people that deserved such punishment.

We have to make clear: Jesus did not say that God does not punish people; Jesus left it open. Jesus also did not say one way or the other whether those were freak accidents or not. What Jesus did imply in the refutation, however, was that 1) if God does indeed punish people for their offenses,

then there has to be justice in the judgment; and 2) that the punishment must also fit the crime.

One important implication of what Jesus said was that there were far worse offenders than those people who died such undeserved deaths. That is a fundamental point in understanding how God operates: God has to be an impartial and just God who is capable of exercising justice in God's judgment. God cannot punish people on whim, and remain a just and righteous God.

People tend to be selfish most of the time, and it spills into the interpretation of the scriptures. In their subconsciousness, people also believe that God thinks in the similar way they do. You ask the conservative Christians what God would say about the universal health care, the chances are it would be different from the answer that the progressive Christians would give. But both would believe their answer is what God would have answered.

So the prophet Isaiah speaks on behalf of God:

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Basically, Jesus tried to teach people what prophet Isaiah was saying: God is nothing like the god in your own imagination. God does not think like you do. A good example is found in Matthew 5. Despite what they have heard that it was said, told Jesus, this is how God is like:

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

To people's consternation, Jesus taught that God is gracious both to the sinners and the righteous:

God gives sunlight and rain to both just and unjust. God is indeed impartial, as long as sustaining human life is concerned. God does not strike some one dead, because that person is a criminal.

But it is human nature to be selfish and partial; and in their partiality, human beings say, "God is on our side, and God blesses us only. Therefore, the infidels deserve to be rounded up, be exiled, or be punished." In their minds, God is just and impartial, simply because they have projected their selfish vindictiveness onto God, and called it God's justice.

From these, we discover that there are basically two different perspectives of religion. One perspective focuses on what God does and does not. The other focuses on what the children of God do and do not.

The group A proclaims what God does and does not. They tell others what God thinks, feels, or wills: God hates gays. God

wants women to be submissive to men. God wills me to become rich. Those who focus on this aspect of religion tend to tell others what God wants, and try to regulate what others should do or not do.

The group B focuses on what God's children do and don't do. They are concerned with what they can do, in order to make life more abundant for everyone. They tend to focus on social justice and economic equitability. They tend to listen to the prophets of old. Prophet Micah summed it up: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. The problems in the human life tend to spring up, when one group tells another what God allegedly told the one group to do to another.

If we understand Jesus correctly, Jesus taught that God wants the human beings to live the fruitful lives. We are put in this world with certain purposes, and we are expected to live the life that bears fruit. We do not really have time to worry about what God does

and does not do, or whom God punishes or rewards. We should be busy trying to bear the fruit of our lives. And that fruit is called the fruit of repentance, and that is the fruit God wants to have.

We repent when we become transformed and renewed as God's precious children. And the fruit of repentance is living the life that is consistent with that transformation and renewal. Apostle Paul put it together in his Letter to the Romans 12:

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

If this is not how we bear the fruit, I do not know what is.