

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, September 17, 2023

The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Evensong

4 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia, *Theologian in Residence*

on

Ezekiel 20:1-8, 33-44

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Eyes to see good, and God

And the Lord said to Ezekiel, “They would not hearken unto me” (Ezekiel 20:7)

Only last night my husband and I were guests at dinner with some people we have met not so long ago and have become very dear friends in the meantime. In the most unexpected way the conversation turned to theology and what was said has remained with me. I kept thinking about it when I came back home last night and the whole day today.

One of the people at the dinner said something I'd never quite formulated to my mind in that way before. He mentioned the argument that if God really existed, he would not allow children to die. If this was true, he added, then we too do not exist because we too let children die – since unfortunately we all are complicitous with systems that let children die of hunger, refuse them medical insurance, and so on.

What I retained from this anecdote is that evil is noisy, visible, always catches our attention first. And from the evil we see we are quick to infer that God does not exist.

What about the good though? Are we not, all too often, unwilling or unable to see the good in life and in the world?

There is a podcast on NPR I listen to quite often, which is called *My Unsung Hero*. It collects the stories of acts of kindness and of goodness done sometimes many, many years in the past, by people often completely unaware of the fact they were doing something which was changing the life of a person for the better. Many years later the person who had benefited from this act of kindness was able to tell the story. This is a drop in the ocean, we might think. The majority of the acts of kindness and of goodness remain without witness. They don't make to the news. Evil and suffering appear to be dominating, winning over the world. Whereas when it comes to the good, it often seems powerless or unable to match the evil which is out there.

The reality is that most of the time we do not have eyes to see the good - and especially to see the ripple effect of even the smallest and apparently insignificant acts of kindness and generosity. Interestingly, Jesus says to his disciples: “Whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward” (Matthew 10:42). Is it not intriguing that Jesus should consider such a small act of generosity as a litmus test of our faithfulness to him?

The point is that there is no act of goodness or kindness, however small which is not worth making because we never know what the outcome will be, how it is going to change the lives of people, and history.

When it comes to the way we look at the world, or at whether or not God exists, most of the time our problem is that we do not have eyes to see the good and to recognize God's action and presence in the world.

You might not have noticed it, but in one of the Psalms we have just sung, there is a complaint which recurs in Scripture constantly: "Lord, why are you hiding from me?" (Psalm 88:14).

We often complain about the absence of God in our lives. Indeed, there are many times in our lives, even in the lives of believers, when it looks as if the God in whom we put our trust is not there, is absent, is not interested in us.

What if the opposite was true?

In times of hardship, challenges, trials we venture a prayer, we ask for God's help. Sometimes things improve as a result. Often though it seems that nothing happens, that God is not there to listen to us, that he is absent, that he is hiding from us. But what if the opposite is true? What if it is *us* who are absent from God, hiding from him? We think of God only when we are in need. What about the rest of the time? This I think is behind God's complaint in the book of Ezekiel: "They would not listen to me" (Ezekiel 20:7). God is saying: if only they gave me a chance! If only they *really* paid attention to me in their lives all the time – and not just when they are in need.

Think about it: when you meet difficulties and trials in your lives and you need to talk to someone, who is the person capable of helping you the most, of giving you the greatest comfort, the best advice? Sometimes it can be a complete stranger, but most of the time, the people we go to are our friends, the people we know and trust, people who really know us. It is our deep acquaintance with these persons that brings us comfort, enables them to support us effectively.

What if in the relationship with God the same was true? We think he is absent only because we do not know him, we are not familiar with his ways, we have not learnt the ways in which he is present and acting in our lives. We do not know how to speak and especially how to listen to him.

The same is true of good, in our lives and in the world. When it comes to recognize good and God we are really short sighted.

Something I've understood very early on in my life is that we do not need to be convinced that God really exists to start talking to him, praying to him, listen to him. Trying is enough. It is when we give him a chance that somehow he becomes real in our lives. We might not find the solution to all our problems, but by trying to pay a bit more attention to good and to God we might discover that evil and suffering are not the only things out there.

More than that: by paying attention to good and to God we might even discover that we have *agency*.

In the Acts of the Apostles, as Paul leaves the people of Ephesus for the last time, he quotes a sentence he attributes to Jesus even though we do not find it in the Gospels: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). Besides comfort and meaning, what faith in this God gives us is *agency*. An agency that plays out in the smallest and apparently most insignificant acts of care, like giving a glass of water to someone. Paul says that in these small acts of goodness we can discover a unique kind of joy and blessing. And maybe one day we might discover the unforeseeable outcomes of this initial small gesture, its unimaginable ripple effect.