

The question Jesus asks of each of us today is “Who do you say that I am?” There is no one answer to this question. And while Jesus Christ is the same today, yesterday and tomorrow....our understanding of Him does change for we all must come to grips with who Jesus is for ourselves, in light of the Scriptures, yes, in the light of our Church’s teaching, yes, but also in the light of our own unique experiences, no matter how sweet or bitter those may be.

One of a number of such experiences for me came after I watched a production of a play based on the book “*The Trial of God*” by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel (El-ee Wee-zel). In this play, several men interned at the Auschwitz death camp put God on trial for the crime of breaking His covenant with His Chosen people. It was very difficult to watch. The stories of the sufferings these men lived through were gut-wrenching and the depths of inhumanity men are capable of is shocking. I hope I am not ruining the story for you, but in the end God is found to be guilty! Not just guilty of abandoning His covenant, but He is proclaimed guilty of the injustices himself...God was declared...to be unjust!

Keep in mind, this was just a play. It does not reflect current Jewish thought. But for me, it struck a very deep cord.

Intellectually, I can understand that God does NOT cause anyone’s suffering, but He allows it to touch each of our lives.

I spent a lot of time trying to reconcile that idea of an unjust God in my own faith, because, frankly, Mr. Wiesel had a very strong argument. How do we account for a just God who allowed the Holocaust? A God who allows

earthquakes and accidents and starvation and disease to so drastically effect innocent people? To be human, to be “us”, is to experience suffering.

We can take some solace in that after the suffering, we are most often left stronger, wiser and, yes, even more loving....but not always and certainly not right away. Sometimes we are just left to hurt and to ask a lot of questions.

Yet our faith, tells us that even in all of this, in spite of all of this, our God remains a just God. But how?

Part of the answer lies in today’s readings.

Jesus asks his disciples “Who do people say that I am?” The answers are pretty much the same as some in our society would say today. He’s a great prophet, a great teacher, a religious leader, someone whose life was worthy of imitation. But this falls far short of who Jesus is. Peter gets it right. He proclaims Jesus the Messiah!

He is the ONE who had been longed for...for so many generations.

Through all the exiles, the persecutions, the occupations, the suppression of their culture, the attempts to crush their very identity as individuals and as a nation, all HOPE was for the coming of the Messiah. Now he was here, they were with Him, they were in his inner circle and they would be a part of the new order. **Things were about to become very different.** It must have been an amazing feeling.

It’s really not surprising that Peter would challenge Jesus when He announced HOW the Messiah would free them....through very human and all-too familiar suffering and through death, on a cross, in shame and

humiliation. He tells Peter and He tells us that the Messiah, the Christ cannot be understood unless it is in the **light** of suffering.

Things were becoming very different, indeed.

Jesus rebukes them. Get behind me and start thinking as God does!

But this is also a turning point in Mark's Gospel. Jesus never again is harsh with them. He loves them, to the very end, even after their betrayals. He spends a lot of energy on teaching them about himself and His relationship to.....suffering. He teaches them, and through them, us, to think like God.

Things were definitely changing.

And as I thought about this, the reason for THAT (point to the Cross) started to become clearer to me. Now I don't claim to know everything, and I am unlikely to ever fully understand the full meaning of the cross as long as I am on this side of Heaven.

But for now, I understand this much.....God is..... in spite of all the ugliness that happens to me, to the ones I love, to each one of us, GOD IS JUST!

I need to sidetrack a minute into our second reading; because it is there that we might come to understand this same conclusion.

As Catholics, we cannot understand this second reading separate from our tradition of social justice. That tradition tells us that all humans, because we are made in the image of God, have great dignity. Because of that dignity we all have rights and duties. And that the rights and the dignity and the care of the poor are primary and take preference over our own.

This is one way that we learn to “deny ourselves” as Jesus instructs today.

But it is the Church’s teaching on the principle of solidarity that for me brought the Cross into clearer focus.

“Solidarity... is not a vague feeling of compassion or some concern at the misfortunes of others. It is far more than a political movement.

*On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering **determination to commit** oneself to the common good; and to the good of each individual, precisely because we are all really responsible for one another. We have a stake in one another! I am convinced, that if we could only see, just for a moment, one another’s crosses, then denying ourselves, carrying our own crosses and living in solidarity, would be a breeze. But we can’t and so we struggle to what we can, even if it might be imperfect.*

Back to the question:

Who do *I* say that Jesus is? In light of my experiences, in every miracle, every word, every action from the Annunciation to Calvary, to the empty tomb Jesus IS the ONE who stands in PERFECT solidarity with our humanity.

Pain, hurt, disappointment, fear, longing, loss.... and any form of misery you can imagine....these were His crosses every bit as much as THAT is His Cross. In His Humanity, He had to pick up and carry each and every one of them.

And while THAT has the greatest redemptive value, all of those other crosses, the ones we bear as well, are also redemptive **because** He stood

among us and bore them. He didn't HAVE to, He CHOSE to. Denying His very self God walked among us and lived among us and touched us.

And because of His death and RESURRECTION, He is fully alive, not only in solidarity but in victory over every suffering and evil that ever was or will be.

And that is why I can say God is just, because He suffers not just for us, but WITH us!

Is the world still full of suffering, yes. Do any of us WANT to suffer? No. Are we made stronger through adversity – you bet – but that is not what is new. That has been going on throughout history.

However, the redemptive suffering, in solidarity, of our Christ has given POWER and VALUE to each and every one of our crosses.

Because, in a mysterious way, our sufferings, in Christ, continue redeeming the world.

Without that understanding, even if it is only intellectual, suffering might seem pointless and cruel and we could understand, maybe even agree, that God that allows it can be called unjust.

But because of THAT (the Cross) because of WHO IT was that chose to hang upon it.....Things **really are very different!**

Thank God for that difference.