

## God's Values versus the World's Values

September 13, 2015

Twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time  
Readings: Isaiah 50.5-9a;  
James 2.14-18;  
Mark 8.27-35**By Elizabeth Scalia**

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks.

Peter replies, with typical boldness, "You are the Christ."

Directly after, our Lord tells the disciples that he will suffer, and die, and be resurrected. That's heady stuff, and Peter – this time, with typical brashness – objects. He suggests that these things cannot happen, must not be permitted to happen.

"Get you behind me, Satan," Jesus rebukes him for thinking like a human being, rather than trying to comprehend the plans of God.

It is a strange conversation. Peter calls Jesus the Christ; Jesus calls Peter "Satan." Jesus predicts suffering; Peter falls into an all-too-human denial – the kind of denial we utter when a friend shares his anxieties with us, or when bad news comes our way. "No, let's assume the best," we say to our friend. "Things work out; reality will not be that harsh!"

### Harsh Realities and a Plan

But reality is often at least as harsh as our fears suggest. Children get sick and suffer; people are injured, maimed, disemployed, attacked; relationships end; earthquakes, and careless drivers, and depraved psychopaths can all wreck a similar havoc upon our hearts. When someone like Peter is told, "I am going to suffer, and then die, and then rise after three days," it sounds like two horror stories and a deranged fantasy. No wonder Peter feels ill-equipped to process it, and falls back on denial.

But Jesus knows better, just as we do. Deep down, we know that "bad things happen," and that no one gets out of life without a measure of grief, loss, pain and suffering. If we have faith, we try to believe that God has a plan in all of it, but that usually comes a bit later. "This is God's plan, and I consent to it," is rarely our first response to hard times and bad news. All too frequently we forget the Good News and remain earthbound in our thinking.

Have you ever looked back several decades and suddenly realized that a "defining" negative event you endured was actually a catalyst – a source of unambiguous motion and direction – that helped deliver you to where you stand, today? People who take the time to think about it usually conclude that the most difficult moments of their lives were the ones that prepared them to face later challenges.

In hindsight, one begins to sense that things are not simply random but instead permitted to happen, even within the course of the decisions we freely make (and the free actions of others) because there is ultimately a plan – one that propels the will of the Creator. We can either work with it, or against it, but somehow, the plan adapts.

It is when we consent to work within the plan that we begin to understand our lives according to God's values, and not humanity's. The French Jesuit Jean-Pierre de Caussade makes this very clear in his masterpiece, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, in which he writes, "If the work of our sanctification presents us with difficulties that appear insurmountable, it is because we do not look at it in the right way. In reality, holiness consists in one thing alone, namely, fidelity to God's plan. And this fidelity is equally within everyone's capacity in both its active and passive exercise."

We can align de Caussade's thinking with a story from our recent history. Karol Josef Wojtyla was born into a century that saw his beloved nation of Poland oppressed first by Nazis, who forced him underground to study for the priesthood, then by Communists, who spied on his pastorate and bishopric. His personal knowledge of the injustice, indignity, and fear that comes with living under a jackboot gave him a peculiarly credible empathy when – years later, as Pope John Paul II – he stood before the Polish people and told them that freedom was theirs, and close at hand, because it is always found in God.

"We want God," the people replied, and governments and walls tumbled.

How do we study the course of these events – a deeply oppressed society, a free choice for the priesthood, a papacy positioned to arise at a precise point in time – and not see the perfect execution of the plan, one given able assist by Wojtyla's ability to hear a call for the priesthood, and decide for it?

We work with God's plan, casting ourselves into the curve of the Holy Spirit, and God uses all of it for his purpose.

## Free Will and Destiny

We are free beings, but God does have his plan, and so our free will and our destiny are constantly commingled. The modern theologian Peter Kreeft calls those two seemingly opposed ideas "the warp and woof of every good story. If a story has no plot, no destiny – if its events are haphazard and arbitrary – it is not a great story. Every good story has a sense of destiny, of fittingness as if it were written by God. But every story also leaves its characters free. . . . God, of course, is the greatest writer of all. Since human life is his story, it must have both destiny and freedom."

This is true, and it leads us to ponder another story: a boy named Joseph Ratzinger was also raised amid the horrors of World War II – a cousin of his, born with Down syndrome, was executed by Nazi eugenicists. Ratzinger grew to be a priest and gifted professor of theology, with a disciplined, unclouded mind and dependable habits. It would be difficult to think of a public figure less likely to surprise the world by word or deed. But despite living for decades within the bubble of the Vatican, Ratzinger – or Pope Benedict XVI – saw the spiritual state of the world quite clearly: "A spiritual desert is spreading," he said to young Catholics in 2008, "an interior emptiness, an unnamed fear, a quiet sense of despair."

Seeing the desert and the despair, and understanding that something beyond stolid sameness was needed for Christ's Church to penetrate such a deep such spiritual torpor, stable Benedict gave the world a demonstration of radical trust; he resigned his papacy, and thereby cast the entire Church, and by extension the world, into the path of the Holy Spirit.

This is an action whose repercussions will be rippling out for many generations, but its immediate effect was to shock the world into sitting up, shaking off its doze, and paying fresh attention to the Catholic Church. The second effect was to raise to Peter's throne a South American pope whose manner is anything but predictable. Francis's fidelity to doctrine matches his predecessor's, but his *way*, his tone, his sometimes ambiguous rhetoric has captured the world's imagination and brought reinvigorating showers of hope to our parched narrative.

How does this happen? It helps to remember that Joseph Ratzinger entered the seminary at an early age, only to be conscripted into the Hitler Youth, from which he eventually deserted. Toward the end of the war, he even spent some months as a prisoner of war, before returning to seminary, which was his destiny. Such unexpected – even chaotic-seeming – events taught Ratzinger something about trusting in the plan and purposes of God; through a lifetime spent surrendering his own preferred narrative to the master storyteller who is the Creator, Benedict understood, with his typical clarity, that what we release to the Third Person of the Triune God can *only* serve the intentions of the First and Second Persons: the Creator and the Christ. Their methods are counterintuitive to our human way of thinking and yet – even when things seem like they’re going horribly awry – the purpose is always toward love, and restoration, and reconciliation, because “I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord.”

## Changing Our Perception

We can comprehend only a microscopic portion of God’s mysterious workings (and even then, only in hindsight), but the tiny bit we do see is enough to change our perception of life as an unendingly random roller coaster, until it seems more like a high-speed rail, linear and direct. Rather than grow giddy with each rise, and dissolve within each fall, we simply move forward; in this way we develop a sense of detachment that is rooted not in withdrawal, but in profound trust – a surety that there is “a time and purpose unto heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

Our readings today testify to the truth of the plan. Isaiah brings us a prophecy of a humiliating moment in Christ’s passion, and also of his victory over his tormentors. Mocked, abandoned, spat-upon, and bullied, the suffering servant concedes to all of it, “knowing that I will not be put to shame.” Two thousand years later, the privations and indignities experienced by Wojtyla and Ratzinger echo both the abasement and the victory of Christ, and confirm for us that in all of our difficulties, we are accompanied by Jesus, who has shared in them. We meet Jesus face-to-face, in every difficulty.

In the second reading, James may seem confusingly vague. Where does a discourse on faith and works fit in with the idea of a plan that is trustworthy, if only we bring our values into alignment with heaven’s, rather than the world’s? But James, rather like Elwood Blues, reveals that “we’re on a mission from God,” and then describes how the engine of mission idles quietly beneath all the plans. James writes, “Faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

*Trust* is the very first work of faith; it is the foundation upon which all other works – whether they be of intercessory prayer, or of almsgiving, or healing, or feeding – are built. The gospel story in which Judas rebukes Jesus for allowing a penitent woman to anoint him illuminates James words; we can imagine Judas saying to the woman, “You have faith and I have works,” to which the woman – or perhaps even Christ himself – might have responded, “Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works.” Faith based on trust inspires outreach to others, but outreach first to Jesus, who is waiting only for that.

## God with Us

While he is at it, James also helps us to answer the question Jesus put to his disciples, and to us: who do we say that Jesus is?

He is Emmanuel, “God-with-us” – not near us, not above us, but with us. He is the Incarnation whose unconditional consent to *be* with us is a model for the Incarnational mission we are meant to embrace within God’s plan: to be Christ for each other.

Jesus consented to abuse and humiliation so as to be there, with us, in our trials and ready for the moment when we reach out to him. He consented to be served – by the penitent woman, by the woman at the well, by the owner of the upper room – in order to dwell amid those sorely in need of our good works; to be there, ready for the moment when our faith leads us into trusting what we do not always understand. He is with us as we carry our crosses; he is with us as our spiritual connections become dry and lifeless, and again when they are renewed and resurrected.

He is the Christ. Peter first pronounced it, and we know it to be true. When, in times of suffering, we are tempted to say, "Heaven forbid!" and, "This cannot be," we can remember that there is nothing we are experiencing that Christ Jesus has not experienced with us: neither abandonment, nor betrayal, nor injustice, nor abuse, nor gossip, nor the heaviest of sorrows.

We can best begin to think less as humans do, and more as God does, when – in every instance of hurt of confusion or great joy – we turn to meet the Christ, who is Emmanuel, God with us, and turn it all over, as he did, to the Creator's plan.

About the Author

*Elizabeth Scalia is a Benedictine Oblate and the Managing Editor of the Catholic Portal at Patheos. She is an award-winning writer and a regularly-featured columnist at [First Things](#) and at [The Catholic Answer Magazine](#). Read her books, [Strange Gods: Unmasking the Idols in Everyday Life](#) and ["I Don't Want to Be a Hoo-er" \(\\*And You Shouldn't Want to be One, Either\)](#).*

### **FOR FURTHER READING**

*Benedict XVI, Homily at the Eucharistic Celebration on the Occasion of the 23<sup>rd</sup> World Youth Day (July 20, 2008), available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2008>*

*Jean-Pierre de Caussade, S.J., Abandonment to Divine Providence, available at: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/decaussade/abandonment.html>*

*Peter Kreeft, "Free Will and Predestination," available at: <http://www.peterkreeft.com/topics-more/freewill-predestination.htm>*

### **IN SHORT . . .**

- ***In hindsight, we can begin to sense that things are not simply random but instead permitted to happen, because there is ultimately a plan that propels the will of the Creator.***
- ***When we consent to work within the plan, we begin to understand our lives according to God's values, not humanity's.***
- ***We are free beings working with God, and so our free will and our destiny are constantly commingled.***
- ***God's methods are often counterintuitive to us, and yet the purpose is always toward love, restoration, and reconciliation.***
- ***Trust is the very first work of faith, the foundation upon which all other works – intercessory prayer, almsgiving, healing, feeding – are built.***
- ***We can best begin to think more as God does when, in every instance of hurt of confusion or great joy, we turn to meet the Christ and turn it all over, as he did, to the Creator's plan.***