

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote the now famous book, "*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*." Some of the things that turn our lives upside down can legitimately be called bad: you might be victim of a crime or natural disaster or serious illness. And some things we label bad because they just didn't go the way we wanted them to: a relationship falls apart, a friend or family member disappoints you, the lottery mistakenly pulled someone else's number. The Rabbi wisely titled his book when bad things happen, not if. No one drifts through life in a haze of peace and serenity, untroubled by the world around them, unaffected by illness or limitations. And a lot of wise people and saints say that running into troubles, facing difficulties, is actually good for us.

You can see it in the life of the great Russian author, Alexander Solzhenitsyn. He was born the year after the Bolsheviks came to power. As a child he was surrounded by Communist propaganda and grew up an untroubled, contented atheist. Anyone who questioned Marxist doctrine, he wrote off as a reactionary. He saw some signs of Soviet brutality - like a convict being struck as if he were an animal - but Solzhenitsyn passed it off as either an isolated incident or as a necessary unpleasantness so that the perfect society could arrive. His belief that the promised utopia would come was for him a scientific certainty. When it came, then, with Russia at the head of the nations, the world would become heaven on earth - with abundance for everyone. Like many young Russians (and Western visitors) Solzhenitsyn blinded himself to the hideous reality of the Soviet system. During World War II he eagerly served as an officer, but at the end of the war, the authorities discovered a letter he had written, critical of Stalin. His dreams of that glorious future happiness vanished when they condemned him to ten years of hard labor in the *gulags*, the labor camps for political prisoners. In those terrible circumstances, he began to question his atheism.

When he emerged, he not only believed in God, but in the forgiveness of sins through Christ. In spite of what he had to endure, for the first time in his life, he discovered joy, true happiness.

We certainly pray that none of us will ever have to face such a terrible experience as Solzhenitsyn endured. But something similar applies in our lives. If we are being honest with ourselves we will admit that things often have to go bad before we find our way to God. The Catechism of the Catholic Church acknowledges that as part of the human situation:

*"Illness can lead to anguish, self-absorption, sometimes even despair and revolt against God. [But] It can also make a person more mature, helping him discern in his life what is not essential so that he can turn toward that which is. Very often illness provokes a search for God and a return to him."*

We can see this in Bartimaeus, the blind man of Jericho. He could have given himself up to self-pity and despair. Instead he heard about Jesus of Nazareth and cried out, not for money, but for the thing that he recognized as essential. "I want to see." This is the only miracle in the gospel where the person is named; scholars think that this is because Bartimaeus was someone well known to the community, most likely a member of the community. Bartimaeus followed Jesus.

The blind cannot follow someone. Can you imagine the joy that Bartimaeus must have had to be able to follow someone on his own, without being led? He really did find out what was essential – to follow Jesus – and that is what he did. He didn't go back to his old life because he had found what really mattered. Ok, he was lucky; he happened to be sitting there when Jesus came by but what about us? How can we find God?

The journalist Peggy Noonan gave an interesting response to that question. A person wrote to her, asking what they need to do in order to find God. She said: "Finding God is not hard. He wants to be found. The difficult part," she said, "is keeping him." Again, if we are being honest we will probably admit that there was at least one time when we stood in awe of God and his involvement in my life, but most of the time we go our way as if that never happened. The difference between finding God and keeping him is like the difference between falling in love and staying in love. Falling in love is amazing; staying in love takes a determined effort. Partly serious and partly in jest she says the first step toward finding God is to get yourself in trouble – which really isn't so hard to do. She doesn't, of course, recommend doing something that would wreck your life or someone else's. What she says is to simply let life make you miserable: "Get low, gnash your teeth, cry aloud, rend your garments, refuse to get out of bed. Be in a crisis."

She is exaggerating to get our attention but we recognize the truth. No matter how great life might be at one moment or another, it does not last. The problem is that we can delude ourselves, start imagining that we will achieve some enduring happiness. Trouble can help shake that delusion.

The first reading found Jeremiah prophesying that the messiah would give sight to the blind. That is quite impressive but even more amazing is that Jesus can help all of us to see. He doesn't send trouble our way to make that happen, but he is willing to step in and show us the essentials that no illness, persecution, bad luck or just dumb mistake can ever overwhelm.

Some of the most religious experiences of my life were on a deployment to a war zone. It didn't matter whether you would be gone a couple months or a year. Whatever "essentials" you thought that you just had to take with you had to fit in one duffle bag. On my first deployment that left me in a panic but for later

Sun 30 b 2012

deployments I figured out that one duffle bag was really more than I needed. Living in a war zone with a routine threat of death did wonders for my spiritual life and for learning to recognize that the real essentials don't take up any room at all.

I wouldn't want any of you to go through something like that but I do pray that when you are troubled, when things do go bad – and they will – that you manage to repeat the words of Bartimeaus. Lord, let me see – let me see what really matters, let me see the things that nothing around me can ever touch or tarnish. Let me see you.