

Dear Karma: What We're Really Hungry For

A sermon on John 9:1-41; 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; & Ephesians 5:8-14 by Nathan Nettleton, 15 March 2026

© LaughingBird.net

Message

The desire for a fair universe is real and grief-filled – but Jesus steps outside that framework entirely, and invites us into something better.

Sermon

As they walked along, they saw a blind man, and the disciples questioned Jesus: “He’s been blind his whole life. Whose fault was it? Did *he* do something to deserve it, or was it something his parents did?”

This is such a human question. We’ve all asked it or wondered it countless times. Life should be fair, and if it was fair, then the innocent wouldn’t suffer, and the guilty wouldn’t get off scot free. So instinctively, when we see misfortune, we long for it to make sense somehow, to be part of a cosmic economy in which everyone gets what they deserve.

For people of religious faith, this question often mutates into something of an obsession with divine rewards and punishments. Earning one and avoiding the other becomes the major focus of the life of faith.



Last weekend, I saw a bloke wearing this t-shirt, “Dear Karma, I have a list of people you missed.”

I so relate to that, and I suspect most of you do too. But it is not just funny, is it? It’s actually naming something we feel quite deeply. We know karma isn’t working the way it is supposed to, and we feel aggrieved about it. The system we want to trust is broken, malfunctioning.

With that t-shirt, we’re not so much questioning the theory as protesting an administrative failure. We’re calling for accountability for the incompetent bureaucrat – be it God or karma or the universe – who failed to properly implement the plan. And we, and maybe this man born blind, are the ones who are getting hurt because of the mismanagement. There’s real grief inside that t-shirt.

Jesus doesn’t defend the idea of karma, as we will see in a moment, but he doesn’t ridicule it either. No doubt Jesus longed for everything to be fair and predictable just as much as we do. Soon, during Holy Week, we will be hearing the story of Jesus’s agonised prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Father, I shouldn’t have to drink this cup of suffering. It’s not fair, I don’t deserve it. If it’s possible, take it away from me.”

It shouldn’t be that hard. We are not even saying that there shouldn’t be suffering in the world, just that it should be much better targeted.

The majority of people in Iran are quite happy to see their oppressors in the ruling regime and the revolutionary guard cop whatever comes their way. It’s easy to understand why. But

even if you think some people genuinely have it coming – why can't the system deliver without innocent bystanders having their lives blown apart too? Karma, it turns out, can't do surgery. We don't just want retribution; we want precision-guided retribution. And that's not what we get. There's always so much collateral damage.

We want the system to work, but even on its own terms, it keeps failing us. We want to know that the choices we make matter, that the consequences of what we do make sense. If the system was working, we'd know how to keep ourselves safe.

Back in our early teens, my second cousin was sitting at a bus stop with some friends when a drunk driver crashed into the bus stop. She spent months in hospital and has lived the rest of her life without one of her legs. If karma worked properly, our good behaviour would provide us with protection against that sort of thing.

The disciples' question about whose sin caused the man to be born blind wasn't just a bit of hard-hearted theology or even just blaming. They were anxiously reaching out for some explanation that can reassure us, that can calm our fear of things being genuinely outside our control.

But when I saw that t-shirt, one of the things that struck me about it was that it didn't seem to be just annoyance or disappointment that lived inside it. And it wasn't just grief either. It was also fatigue. It was expressing the feelings of someone who is exhausted by constantly striving to do the right thing and earn that good karma, but never quite being able to do enough to stave off the bad, to turn back the forces of suffering and disaster that seem to break through every imaginable chink in our defensive goodness.

In our first reading tonight, we heard God telling Samuel that "the Lord does not see as human beings see." Well that's all very well, but wasn't it God who said "Obey and you'll be blessed; disobey and you'll face disaster"? Sounds like if you follow that carefully, you can engineer good outcomes. If that wasn't God setting up the principle of karma, then how on earth does God see things?

Well, as people who believe that knowing God comes by looking at Jesus, I guess we need to return to Jesus and start to see what he is thinking and saying.

What does he say in response to the question about who was at fault for this man being born blind? He says, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned." So before he says anything else, Jesus has already flagged that he is not buying into the karma system. He's not trying to defend its workings by showing that this really was fair and there really is someone at fault. No one's at fault. And when he subsequently heals the man, that's not a reward earned for anything either.

Jesus steps out of the karma worldview completely. The Lord does not see as human beings see.

But Jesus is also not just saying, "Shit happens. Get used to it." There is no resignation or hopelessness in his response.

“In order that God’s works might be revealed in him, we must work the works of the One who sent me.” When Jesus sees the man, he doesn’t see a theological puzzle to be solved, or a trigger for anxiety about whether life is fair and what might befall us if it’s not. Jesus sees a human being who needs God to work in his life. And he sees that work as something we are called to participate in, to contribute to.

This is a consistent pattern with Jesus. While the Pharisees and even his own disciples are caught up in a worldview that says that this man’s missing eyesight and my cousin’s missing leg must have been divine punishments for something, Jesus sees whatever is missing as simply an opportunity to continue God’s creative work of bringing everything to completion, to the fullness of the destiny for which we were created.

Nothing to do with rewards or punishments, or good karma or bad karma. Just a person, like any other person, who is not yet complete; someone for whom there is still work to be done before they are whole. There’s not one of us for whom that’s not the reality in one way or another.

You might remember that at the end of the story, long after the healing and all the controversy that it stirs up, Jesus turns this whole story into a metaphor of what we can and can’t see. Some of the Pharisees ask him, “Surely you’re not saying we are blind, are you?” But Jesus says that it is their very insistence on being the ones who see and understand everything that proves their blindness. The Lord does not see as human beings see.

And as the blind man discovers when his eyes are opened, seeing clearly is not without cost. At the beginning of the story, when the disciples want their eyes opened to better understand the workings of karma, of divine reward and punishment, Jesus says there’s nothing to see there.

But when the blind man truly does begin to see and understand that, to see as the Lord sees, what he sees is a whole world still drawing up lists of people who karma hasn’t caught up with yet. He sees a world still striving and struggling to get that reward and punishment system to work properly. And he no longer fits in that world.

In that world, healing is supposed to be a reward for some glorious deed of righteousness, but all this man was doing was sitting and begging, so his neighbours are so confused that they begin to doubt that it is even really him. Maybe it’s just someone who looks like him.

Even his parents don’t know what to do with him. They know it’s really him, but under interrogation and threat by the hardline religious authorities, they are ready to abandon him and let him face the threat alone. “We don’t know anything about what happened. Ask him. He can speak for himself.”

The religious authorities are cracking down hard to try to prevent anyone else beginning to look at the world through different eyes. A man who is seeing the world differently and won’t shut up about it is a threat they can’t tolerate. How are they going to control everyone’s behaviour if they can’t hold out a cast iron promise of reward for obedience and punishment for disobedience? They might be the ones benefitting most from it, but they are still just as trapped in that failing worldview as any of us.

Even as that worldview fails us, we find ourselves clinging desperately to the hope that it might somehow recover and deliver on its promise of reliable rewards for those who deserve them, and carefully targeted retribution for those who richly deserve it. And the more it fails us, the more we feel the grief that the t-shirt was pointing to.

That grief arises from a hunger that is going unmet, and perhaps if we allow Jesus to open our eyes to see as he sees, we will see that this gnawing hunger wasn't really for quite what we thought it was. Because remember that thing we noticed about the fatigue that inhabited the t-shirt too. We think we hunger for a world where karma, or the reward and punishment system, work properly and reliably. But even if it did, we'd still spend our whole lives busting a gut trying to stay on the right side of the ledger. It's exhausting.

Maybe you found your hunger piqued and your heart singing as Liesl sang our psalm for us tonight. "Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life." Psalm 23 paints an alluring picture of a world where we can rest from our desperate striving. A world where we can relax in green meadows by quiet waters while a table is spread before us with an abundant feast, and none of us had to earn our invitation.

Isn't that the world we were really hungering for? Not the world of constant struggling to earn enough, but a world shaped by God's abundant generosity. A world in which there is always plenty, and human potential is flourishing for all of us.

But beware the risk of hearing this as an opportunity to hide away from a suffering world and do nothing but relax and enjoy the gifts all for yourself. That's not where the story leaves us.

The reason the formerly blind man ends up in so much trouble with the authorities is precisely because he won't shut up about what he can now see. He's not attacking anyone or criticising anyone, but he is speaking up about the abundant and unearned goodness of God that he has tasted in Jesus, and that message exposes the miserliness and manipulateness of the only things the religious authorities were peddling.

As the Apostle Paul said in our reading from Ephesians tonight, "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them." He doesn't tell us to avoid the works of darkness or hide ourselves away from them. He tells us to expose them. "Everything exposed by the light becomes visible," he tells us. You don't have to attack anything. Just shine your light, speak of what has happened to you as the formerly blind man did, and the light and truth you bring will make the works of darkness visible and exposed.

Of course, doing that can be costly in our day, just as it was in his day. Last week, bloggers and social media influencers in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait who had started posting citizen journalist type content about what they were experiencing of the war were [warned that they would be prosecuted if they published any word of the war](#) that hadn't first been approved by the authorities.

It is exactly the same as what happened to the formerly blind man. "If you tell the world what you are seeing and make visible what we don't want anyone to see, we will come down on you with the full force of the law. You will see things the way we tell you to see them, or you will pay." Plain testimony – this is what happened to me – is outlawed.

You may remember me speaking about the projects of beauty advocated by Bishop Malkhaz in Georgia. Don't put your energy into attacking and condemning the rising ugliness, he says. Put it instead into projects of beauty that reveal the alternative. Living from the Psalm 23 economy of abundance and generosity and speaking about it plainly when anyone asks, is itself a project of beauty. That's all it takes to become open windows, to become living icons through which the world can glimpse and be drawn into that new life of abundance and generosity and love.