

LENT SUNDAY III "C"
MARCH 23/24, 2019

We human beings have an innate drive to find causation, a reason for things and events happening. This generally works well and helps us devise systems and ways of doing things that are safer and more productive. For example, automobile accident rates have been going down for years. This is the result of several things: the design and manufacture of cars that are safer, improved highway construction, public and private educational efforts promoting safe driving practices (the use of seat belts), and finally in some cases, laws to force safety compliance (no texting or cell-phone use with hand held-devices while driving). Yet, despite all our science and technology, sometimes in the face of natural or human caused events that bring suffering, death and destruction, we are left trying to explain the unexplainable.

In the ancient world, and perhaps at times in our own time, many tragic events were explained by appeal to God. Insurance policies still write out clauses for protection from "acts of God." Or, as we see in the two tragic instances brought to Jesus' attention in the Gospel today, it was understood that bad things happened to bad people. The suffering a person or group is experiencing is claimed to be caused by God because of their sinfulness. "You reap what you sow" as the saying goes. Much of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) especially in the first five books of the Bible known as the Torah, provide underpinning for this view. But as both human knowledge about our human nature and the gradual understanding of the person and nature of God developed, other books in the Old Testament questioned previous assumptions, for example the Book of Job.

At the time of Jesus, the tragic collapse of the tower at Siloam and the capricious slaughter of a group of Galileans as they were performing a religious ritual and the desecration of their blood by mixing it with pagan sacrifices by Pontius Pilate are seen by those who bring them to Jesus' attention as examples of divine retribution. These people, they reason, must have been great sinners either publicly or secretly. They got what they deserved. Implicitly, these self-proclaimed "Holier than thou" are saying, like the proud Pharisee who prays in the Temple, "Thank God we are not like them."

Jesus has none of their argument and, even more, their “holier than thou” righteousness. Instead he tells them that the same will happen to them spiritually, if not necessarily physically, unless they repent. The period of time they have been witnessing with the tragedies that befell others and the fact of the unknown time of their own death is a God-sent “wake up call” to repent much like the “check engine” light suddenly appearing as we are driving our car. We ignore it to our peril.

To drive home his point Jesus tells a parable about a fig tree and its failure to produce fruit. Of course everybody knows you excise trees from a grove that do not produce fruit even after being given a “grace” period and in their place plant one that will, hopefully, yield its potential. But here the story changes. The gardener suggests to the owner that the unproductive tree be given just a bit more time and promises to work up and fertilize the soil around it. If it still bears no fruit then it can be cut down.

Repentance is the work of Jesus, the gardener. Repentance is God’s forbearance, God’s patience toward us. God desires no one to die, but that everyone share life now and eternally with him. More than just being sorry for sins committed, repentance is the grace, given to begin, or continue, the process of turning away from our sins and turning toward God. Lent’s traditional “works” of prayer, fasting and acts of service are so much more than religious gymnastics, some sort of spiritual “tough man” or “tough woman” contest of forty day endurance to prove a point to God.. No, this season is our decision to cooperate with God’s grace not only for six weeks every year, but every day of our lives, as we heard when we presented ourselves to have ashes imposed on us on Ash Wednesday: **“Repent and believe the Gospel”**; a daily choice to center our lives, thoughts, actions, in God. To accept and live the grace of repentance is the assurance that our lives will bear fruit on the day that the Lord comes, however and whenever that will be.

Like Moses in the first reading, this moment, this place, this Mass, finds us standing on holy ground. God is calling us by name. **Repent. The Lord is kind and merciful.** (Refrain: Responsorial Psalm. Ps. 103).