

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Our scripture passage comes from the Gospel of Luke 13:1–9. In this reading, Jesus teaches His disciples about the need to interpret the signs of the times and to have a personal change of heart in light of the events taking place around them. This message is important for us as well especially during this Lenten time when we pray for the grace of repentance.

Jesus begins His teaching by responding to the crowd's question about a tragedy that occurred through human malice. In particular, we are told that Pilate had killed some Galileans. The historical facts surrounding this tragedy are not known but the religious presumption of Jesus' time was that disasters were always punishment for sin (see Jb 4:7, Ex 20:5, and Jn 9:2–3). This belief is known as the principle of direct retribution and was based on a misunderstanding of God's justice by which the good are rewarded in this life and the bad (sinners) are punished in this life. Thus, if bad things happen to people then the presumption was that they were sinners.

Jesus teaches the crowd that their understanding is mistaken. Sometimes bad things happen because of human free will and the evil actions of individuals such as Pilate. The greater tragedy, however, isn't when someone suffers at the hands of another person but when an individual has not used well the gift of time and opportunities for repentance prior to a tragedy.

Jesus then provides another example of tragedy that is the sole result of natural disaster rather than involving any human malice: the collapse of the Tower of Siloam. In this second example the people suffered from an accidental event. Again, Jesus points out that such things are not an indication of the victim's sinfulness but a reality of life. The greater tragedy occurs when people fail to make good use of the gift of time and opportunities for repentance prior to such a tragedy.

Finally, Jesus gives the parable of a fig tree that does not bear fruit and of how it, too, will be destroyed. In this final example, however, the destruction will be the specific result of not bearing fruit. Jesus goes on to describe how the tree will be given time and encouragement to bear that fruit. In this final example, Jesus is teaching us that the greatest tragedy is that which we bring on ourselves by our failure to repent and change our lives especially when we are given time and encouragement to do so.

This is a powerful lesson for us as disciples. When we see tragedies occurring around us then it should motivate us to evaluate our own lives and encourage us to make the needed changes so that we can be in right relationship with God and others. We may never know the time or circumstance when our time will come ... but we can choose now to be spiritually prepared and in right relationship with God and others nonetheless.

When do people today try to erroneously interpret tragedy as a sign of God's punishment for sin?

How can your awareness of other people's tragedies cause you to examine your own life and reconsider your actions and priorities so as to change your behavior?

Every historical event can be a teaching moment. What are some of the recent historical events in our world that you believe God has allowed for the purpose of such a teaching moment?

What does the statement, “the greatest tragedy is that which we bring on ourselves by our failure to repent and change our lives” mean to you?

Jesus then goes on to describe the various efforts that will be undertaken in order to motivate the fig tree to bear fruit. The image of a fig tree is well developed in the Old Testament and was used as a symbol for Judah or Israel (v. Hos 9:10, Mi 7:1, Jer 8:13, 24:1–10). Thus, we should not understand this parable as some generic teaching about a plant but as the specific will of God for His people. When we hear the words “repentance” and “fruit” used together in this passage then we should remember the first time these terms were associated in the Gospel of Luke when John the Baptist preached to the crowds in Luke 3:8–14. In that passage, John instructed the crowds that it was necessary to bear the “fruits of repentance” and he then gave concrete examples. Those examples included generosity for those in need, integrity in one’s professional life, and justice in the face of hardship.

Repentance, then, is not only an interior feeling or religious sentiment of compunction but also involves a real change of mind that brings about a corresponding change of behavior in every day actions. Repentance means to take on the mind of Christ and to act according to the values of the Gospel as a friend of Jesus. The salvation of the fig tree depends upon its ability to actually bear such fruit.

This parable is telling us that in God’s mercy the Lord gives us both time and encouragement to experience that repentance which bears fruit. God’s patience allows us the gift of time so that we can cooperate with the Lord’s grace (2 Pt 3:15). The problem is that we oftentimes fail to make good use of the time and opportunities we have for repentance. Perhaps it is a habit of procrastination that leads us to postpone the challenging correction of our shortcomings and our decision for deeper discipleship. As it was previously stated, sometimes tomorrow never comes whether it is a matter of another person’s ill will (Pilate) or accidental disaster (Tower of Siloam); it can even be our own failure to respond to God’s grace that brings about our spiritual and even physical destruction.

How does the above understanding of repentance, that is thinking again or taking on the mind of Christ, change the way you desire to “repent” in your life?

What other reasons do you think people can have for not repenting when they have the time and encouragement to do so?

What is the “fruit,” the realized concrete actions of daily life, which God wants to bring about in your life?

In an effort to stimulate the tree to produce fruit, Jesus tells us that the gardener puts manure around it and tills the soil. That’s a very important image and the term “manure” is a significant

one. We should not whitewash it by calling it “fertilizer”!

Manure has a purpose which is to stimulate growth so as to produce the good fruit of repentance. Sometimes God has to put manure in our lives to wake us up to our need to repent. The reality is that manure happens. It’s not a sign of God’s punishment but of God’s mercy calling us to greater repentance. It is meant to be a fertilizer for our growth in faith that stimulates a change in life. When things go well, we rarely feel our need to turn towards God. More often than not, it’s when tragedy strikes in our lives or in the lives of others that we turn to the Lord.

We see an example of this search for meaning in the midst of tragedy happening when the crowd posed the question to Jesus about the death of Galileans by Pilate. So often when we find ourselves dealing with difficult or painful situations, we can experience self-pity and say, “Why me?” However, with an attitude of right faith, we can also find ourselves in prayer asking that same question “Why me?” not out of self-pity but out of a sincere desire to know how our lives are meant to be changed by God’s grace and our spiritual growth stimulated by that manure (fertilizer for faith).

Lent is a good time to look at some of the manure that is been dumped around each of our lives and to bring it before God so the Lord can till the soil of our hearts and allow it to give growth to deeper faith rather than remain on the surface and be a cause of self-pity.

What does this reflection mean to you?

When have you asked the question “Why me?” out of self-pity?

When have you taken on the attitude of faith that asks that question “Why me?” for the purpose of seeking growth?

When have you seen difficult moments become the catalyst for others to grow deeper in their faith?

What manure is sitting on the surface of your life that you need to allow God to till so as to become a positive motivation for spiritual growth (repentance)?

What have been some of the more significant moments of spiritual growth in your own life that have been the result of difficulty, tragedy or trial?

Lent is a time of repentance in which we are called to turn away from sin and grow closer to the Lord in all areas of our lives. The parable of the fig tree is given to us in the middle of our Lenten Time to motivate us to use wisely the remaining weeks and not to miss opportunities for additional growth in faith. Jesus said that the fig tree would have three years to produce fruit. That time corresponds to the three years of our Lord’s public ministry. The good news is that we do have time to repent; the challenge of this gift is that we are responsible for using it wisely and productively so as to bear the fruit God wants from each of us.

How does this passage motivate you to renew your resolve during this Lenten Time?

The timing of God’s judgment may be uncertain but the fact of God’s judgment is certain;

how can these remaining days of Lent provide additional opportunities for you to prepare for God's judgment?

What Lenten practices help you to cultivate the soil of your heart so as to be more sensitive and receptive to God's encouragement?

What opportunities for spiritual enrichment and graced personal growth are available to you during these remaining weeks of Lent and what is preventing you from taking advantage of those opportunities?