

The Third Sunday of Lent, Year C, 2022

Isaiah 55.1-9; Luke 13.1-9, Psalm 63.1-9

I tell you, unless you repent, you will perish.

Today's gospel mentions two events that occurred during Jesus' lifetime is a timely reminder that Jesus' ministry is grounded in the history of a particular people, a particular time and a particular political reality, just like our ministry today lived in him is. The mention of Pilate is the second time the Roman Governor of Palestine is named in Luke's gospel. The first mention occurs at the beginning of chapter three with the announcement of John the Baptist's ministry.

**“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:**

**‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’” (Luke 3.1-5)**

The second mention of Pilate hints at a disturbing use of power. Not only does Pilate have some Galileans killed, we do not know for what reason (possibly insurrection) he goes on to mix their blood with the Jewish sacrifices made at the Temple. It takes a particular kind of mindset to want to humiliate a people even further. Life is sacred in one way. Our rituals which uphold a relationship with God are sacred in another. The desecration of sacred buildings and monuments hits at the soul of a God-orientated people. Rituals root us. They give us identity. They keep us close to God. It is these sacrifices, these offerings that Pilate mingles with the blood of some Galileans. Pilate is demonstrating his power. He is demonstrating where human

power lies. Power lies with Pilate as the representative of the Roman Empire in Palestine. He will at the insistence of those in power and a mob have Jesus crucified.

The other event mentioned is a tower that collapses killing 18 persons, the Tower of Siloam. Probably a tower close to the Pool of Siloam that many of us will have visited in Jerusalem. 18 is a body count. If you Italian and hear of the collapse of the tower of Siloam, say in churches across Italy today, you might well recall the collapse of the Genoa motorway bridge killing 43 persons. The motorway bridge has been rebuilt. It is illuminated at night in the national colours of Italy, which is cynical given that political questions of oversight will have contributed to its collapse. As a teenager and a young adult growing up in Germany in the 70s I got around a lot and was impressed by the many hundreds of motorway bridges the West Germans built at a furious pace. Some fifty years later all are in need of maintenance. It isn't enough to build; you must maintain. Through our keeping of Lent we are attending to ourselves as if we were a fig tree as in the parable that we may bear fruit In God's name.

Jesus is making a central point. It flies in the face of much conventional religiosity and spirituality. He is saying that the people who died at the hand of Pilate or who died suddenly due to the collapse of a tower, a bridge or some other man-made catastrophe, aided by neglect like the Grenfell Tower fire of 2017 in which 72 people died – these people are no more or less sinners than others. Do not draw the wrong conclusions for yourselves from these sudden deaths and the calamity that is the lot of many, too many. He says that unless you repent, unless you turn, you will die as they did as sinners in need of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The message that John proclaimed is being emphatically reinforced by Jesus. What is required is repentance, only then can we fully appreciate our need of God, our complete dependence on God. Only then can sins be forgiven. You must repent. You must turn. You must have a changed heart and mind. In the light of this uncompromising

insistence we call out. “Lord, have mercy on us for we have sinned.” In the light of the words of Scripture, in the light of the present daily challenges on many fronts, I don’t know about you but I come up wanting. Definitely not one of the heroes of the Christian faith like my namesake St. Patrick. “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Is it because one loves God too little or life too much? Is it because one fears too much and trusts too little? Is because one speaks of peace, but is not ready to be a part of the solution? Some words from the Book of Tobit in the Book of Common Prayer spoken at the offertory provide for some comfort and an outstretched hand that I want to take ahold of. “Be merciful after thy power: if thou hast much, give plenteously; if thou hast little, do thy diligence gladly to give of that little; for so gatherest thou thy self a good reward in the day of necessity! (Tobit 4. 8, 9) I am hearing: Give of the little you are and do what you can, Patrick.

Trevor Huddleston, a monk of the Community of Resurrection based in Mirfield, Yorkshire, England, worked in South Africa and was expelled because he opposed Apartheid. A book he wrote reflecting on his time in South Africa and the ideology was entitled *Naught for Your Comfort*. This is what many still need to hear that although the Gospel Message reassures, strengthens and yes brings comfort, it is also *Naught for our Comfort*. Often enough it is for our discomfort. Have I as Christian been living with false assumptions about the future? To the extent that I neglect the importance of the Here and Now? We can only live in the present. Now matters. Of course one ought to work towards certain goals, look to the future, but the living of the life is always now, now, now... Life is lived now and it is always lived in the presence of God.

In the ordering of my life I have a sense of time and the time I need to achieve different tasks. When things interrupt that ordering I am not as flexible as I think I ought to be. I am not sharing this for you to resolve the dilemma for me, but to see how we *order* our lives impacts on how we *live* our lives. How we respond or don't respond. I have been feeling mightily uneasy over these past weeks and months. I published a prayer in today's order of service, which I believe speaks forcefully of change, while like a tree remains rooted in God.

Show us, good Lord,  
the peace we should seek,  
the peace we must give,  
the peace we can give,  
the peace we must keep,  
the peace we must forgo,  
and the peace you have given  
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I repeat what I said only a few weeks ago like some Desert Father of old. "We are all a work in progress." Today's parable points us in this direction. Sometimes we don't bear fruit. We need tending. It requires an act of the will to allow ourselves to be attended to. It requires of us that we turn. To break habits requires a change that has something of the following to it for the Christian who is ready to live their life and not simply profess it. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." This is like the bare minimum and even this seems too much for many: belief, community, Holy Communion and prayers.

The question today's parable raises is, Are we bearing fruit, fruit that will last as a community and as individuals? Fruit can be seen. It can be collected. It can be tasted. It can be eaten. It is of life and it brings life as it passes on its nutritious value. In my reading of this parable at this time and in this moment I see Jesus as the gardener and the owner as God the Father. This gives me both comfort that even now God will tend

to this fig tree of his - me. It gives me confidence to walk a little straighter in the service of God and the tasks, responsibilities and people God has entrusted to me in different ways and instances (Zuversicht). It is also a warning that time is flying. And I remain grateful that God in Christ is our advocate, constantly interceding for us at the right hand of our Father that we may live.

I will end with some words of St Paul's today as we say goodbye this week to Marty Siwy, a backbone of this church for many years.

"We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living." (Romans 14:7-9)